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THE STRICKEN SCHOOLBOY!

The weird prophecy of Zuma the Mystic is fulfilled when Church of the St. Frank's Remove, for no apparent reason, collapses in the middle of an exciting footer match. See the splendid long complete yarn inside.



The fortune-teller passed his hand over the smooth surface of the crystal, and Church looked on wondrously. Suddenly a look of fear came into the seer's eyes, and he shuddered. "Go!" he muttered hoarsely. "You are a bad subject. I dare not tell you what your future will bring!"

Amazing New Mystery Series!Opening Story Below!

THE STRICKEN SCHOOLBOY!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

Following a visit to a mysterious fortune-teller named Zuma, Church, of the Remove at St. Frank's, becomes unwell. Handforth buys up half a chemist's shop in an effort to cure him, but Church steadily gets worse, eventually developing an unknown yet deadly illness! This story teems with mystery thrills, fun and adventure. Start it now.—ED.

CHAPTER 1.

Zuma The Mystic!

"HALLO!" said Handforth. "What's this?"

The famous leader of Study D at St. Frank's applied the brakes of his bicycle, and Church and McClure dutifully followed his example. It was a clear, crisp afternoon, and the sun was shining with a steely brightness.

The three Removites had just turned the bend in the lane, and were within sight of Bellton Village. Three or four girls were standing about in the road, laughing and talking, and looking at a curious tent which had been pitched on the grass border of the lane just beyond the nearest cottages.

"Hallo, Ted!" said Irene Manners, of the Moor View School, as Handforth jumped off his bicycle. "You're just in time!"

"Am I?" said Edward Oswald Handforth. "Just in time for what?"

The girls laughed merrily.

"We want you to come into the fortune-teller's tent with us, and to have your palm read!" said Doris Berkeley, with a twinkle in her eyes. "Won't it be wonderful, Ted, for you to know what you're going to be when you grow up?"

"He doesn't need a fortune-teller for that!" said Church. "He's going to be a prize-fighter!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you silly ass!" roared Handforth, glaring at Church.

"Well, a detective, then!" amended Church solemnly.

"You—you—"

"Don't be silly, Ted—they're only chipping you!" smiled Irene. "But, I say, wouldn't it be rather fun to have sixpenn'orth?"

She was looking towards the tent, and Handforth & Co. gave it their full attention. It was rather an impressive tent, with a decorated front. Right across the top were

the words, "Zuma the Mystic," and standing in front was an impressive individual, dressed in long, rich, flowing robes. He was a brown man of some kind, and he seemed utterly indifferent regarding the schoolboys and schoolgirls who were so near.

Handforth turned to the girls and looked at them in astonishment. They were Irene Manners, Doris Berkeley, Winnie Pitt, and Ethel Church. The latter had already received one or two winks from her brother, although Handforth had no knowledge of this.

"My only hat!" ejaculated the leader of Study D. "You don't mean to say, Irene, that you're going to have your fortune told?"

"Why not?" asked Irene defensively.

"Why not?" echoed Handforth. "Why, it's all spoof, of course—all rot! These people are only gipsies—"

"Rats!" said McClure. "Zuma isn't a gipsy name."

"I don't suppose it's a real name at all!" scoffed Handforth. "You know what these people are—full of bluff and bluster. You'll be throwing your money away if you go into that tent. Besides, it might not be safe. They might try to kidnap you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It won't cost much," said Church, with a grin. "You've only got to go inside, and cross old Zuma's palm with silver, and the thing's done!"

"I entirely disagree with it!" said Handforth loftily. "I disapprove of these people on principle. This Zuma chap has set his tent here to catch the villagers, and it's only the duffers who will patronise him."

"Thanks awfully!" said Irene sweetly.

"I—I didn't mean—"

"Well, we'll be duffers for once," went on Irene. "I think it's awfully exciting to have one's fortune told. I expect Zuma will tell me to beware of a dark boy who will cross my path some time next week."

"He's far more likely to tell you to beware of a big, burly fathead, with a rugged face and a loud voice!" said Church solemnly.

Handforth stared.

"Why should he tell Irene to beware of a chap like that?" he asked, without in the least realising that his own description had been given. "There aren't any fellows like that about here!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the giddy joke?" demanded Handforth tartly. "Rats!, I'm not going to stop here, and then have the village people cackling at me. If you girls like to go in and have your fortunes told—well, that's your concern. But I'm not going to be mixed up in it! Come on, you chaps!"

He jumped on his bicycle, and Church and McClure, with a final grin at the girls, followed his example. The mighty Edward Oswald was in one of his obstinate moods. He disapproved of fortune-tellers, and he wasn't going to go away from his principles even for the sake of Irene! And everybody

knew that he had a particularly soft spot for the fair-haired, blue-eyed Moor View girl. No, Handforth considered that this was one of those moments when it was necessary for him to show his strength of will.

"You were a bit blunt with them, old man," said Church, as they rode on towards the school.

"And I meant to be!" said Handforth sternly. "I'm surprised at Irene—and at your sister, too, Churchy! I'm surprised at them all! I thought they had more sense!"

"You howling ass!" said McClure. "They were kidding you! And suppose they do go into the tent and have sixpenn'orth? It's only a bit of fun! If it comes to that, I wouldn't mind having a go. These fortune-teller chaps are always interesting."

But Edward Oswald Handforth refused to listen. He had announced that he did not approve of Zuma the Mystic, and there the matter ended.

But did it?

As Handforth pedalled on, a frown on his rugged brow, he little realised that this trivial incident was to be the forerunner of the most startling event that St. Frank's had known for many, many years!



CHAPTER 2.

Very Remarkable!

IRENE MANNERS looked at the other girls, and her eyes were laughing.

"Well, shall we?" she asked gaily. "Just for fun, you know!"

"Why not?" smiled Doris. "Then we could kid old Ted afterwards. If you'll go in, Renie, I'll come with you. The others can wait outside for us."

"That's the idea!" said Ethel. "I wouldn't go in the place for a fortune! I'd be too scared!"

"Rubbish!" said Irene. "There's nothing to be afraid of, you silly! But perhaps we'd better not!" she added doubtfully. "We don't want to have everybody laughing at us, do we?"

They stood there, hesitating, and the impressive figure in front of the tent raised a solemn hand.

"Zuma is ready!" he announced in a queer kind of broken English. "Zuma knows all; he sees all! The future has no secrets from Zuma!"

"He's afraid we're going to slide off!" murmured Doris. "Come along, Renie—let's chance it. It'll only take two or three minutes, and there'll be lots of fun."

"All right!" said Irene promptly.

They made up their minds on the spur of the moment, and walked into the tent. The doorkeeper opened the flap for them, and he closed it immediately they had entered. The two girls now found themselves

in a surprisingly mysterious interior. They had expected the inside of a tent to be just ordinary, with daylight coming through holes in the canvas. But the reality was quite different.

The interior of the tent was completely enshrouded in black curtains. Not a chink of daylight came through. And once the tent flap was closed, they appeared to be in total darkness. But this was only a first impression. There, in the centre of the space, sat a queer, wrinkled figure. He was sitting on a huge pile of cushions, and in front of him was a little pedestal containing a gleaming, scintillating crystal. The only light in that tent came from the crystal itself. It glowed and burned, flickering eerily. Where the light came from the girls could not tell. Obviously, there was some trickery here, but it was very cleverly done.

However, there was nothing to alarm them. They knew that their companions were just outside, separated only by a flap of canvas. They could even hear their laughing voices, and the sound of a motor-car coming down the lane reassured them. Still, Zuma had undoubtedly succeeded in creating the correct atmosphere inside his portable house of mystery.

Zuma looked up, and his eyes were wrinkled like his face. Just two tiny points of light gleamed out from behind the crinkly folds of skin. He wore silken robes, and a strange headdress almost concealed his head, coming down over his ears.

"Be seated!" he said in a low, solemn voice.

"I'm only here to look 'on!" said Doris promptly. "You sit down, Renie—it won't take a minute."

Irene took her seat on a low stool quite near the crystal, opposite the mystic. Zuma concentrated his gaze upon the crystal itself. He seemed to shake all over, and the girls watched curiously.

"I see a big school, with many girls," droned Zuma. "Your name, fair one, is Irene Manners, and you are very popular with all your fair companions. You have many friends, and— But, wait! Wait! There is one friend here who impresses me greatly. Her name? Wait, wait! Yes, her name is Ethel. Yes, Ethel Church. She is the friend who is surrounded by strange and mysterious influences. She knows not this; she suspects not."

"What do you mean?" asked Irene in astonishment. "Ethel Church is one of my chums, but how did you know it?"

"I know all!" replied Zuma impressively. "Nothing is hidden from me."

And to the genuine surprise of Irene and Doris, the old crystal-gazer proceeded to tell the most accurate facts about Irene. Many of them no doubt were due to pure guesswork. Perhaps the old chap was an excellent character-reader. For he had given Irene a very searching examination as she had sat down. At any rate, he told her character with remarkable faithfulness. And at last,

when all the laughter had gone out of their eyes, the two girls left the tent. Irene gave the doorkeeper half-a-crown as she went out, and he accepted it as a matter of course.

"Hallo! You're not looking particularly jolly!" said Winnie Pitt, as she and Ethel joined the pair. "What's the matter? Has old Zuma been telling you—"

"Don't laugh, Winnie," said Irene. "These old fortune-tellers aren't so fraudulent as I suspected. It's wonderful. Zuma has been telling me all sorts of things about myself, and about Ethel, too."

"About me?" said Ethel Church, staring.

"Yes," said Irene. "He knew your name and everything. Said that there were strange influences about you. I think you ought to go in and hear what he has to say. It might be jolly interesting."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Ethel. "I don't believe it. You silly cuckoos. He's been spoofing you!"

But Irene and Doris did not laugh. They were deeply impressed.



CHAPTER 3.

Ethel Church Has a Shot!

ETHEL CHURCH was looking rather doubtful.

"Do you really think I ought to go in?" she asked dubiously.

"Well, it won't do any harm," said Winnie. "And perhaps this old Zuma will be able to tell you something. He seems to be a bit of a marvel, anyhow."

They had just heard all that Irene and Doris had to tell, and they were certainly surprised. How had the mystic known that Irene had a chum named Ethel Church? And how was Ethel surrounded by strange influences? It was only natural that Ethel should want to know more. And being a girl, she could scarcely resist the temptation to "have a shot."

"I won't go in alone!" she said firmly.

"That's all right," said Winnie Pitt. "I'll come with you. We might as well have our turn, anyhow."

And so they went in.

Ethel was very pleased that Winnie had accompanied her. She was rather a reserved girl, and had never been particularly prominent in Irene's famous "Co." And now, amid these strange surroundings, she was feeling particularly nervous.

"Isn't it—it funny?" she murmured, glancing at her companion.

"Oh, they're always like this, Ethel, old girl!" murmured Winnie. "Cheer up! Take your seat and hear your fate."

Zuma had made no sign so far. He sat amidst his cushions like some magician of old. He was swaying gently to and fro, his eyes closed, his brown face a mass of

strange wrinkles. The crystal glowed with a thousand fires, flickering and glimmering eerily.

Suddenly Zuma looked up, and he fixed his gaze upon Ethel. She started, and coloured somewhat. She was beginning to wish that she had never come into this peculiar tent. She had never supposed that fortune-tellers were so surrounded by mysterious atmosphere. Zuma seemed to be very different from the majority of such people. There was nothing of the charlatan about him.

He had been pitched on this spot for a day or two. The village people had talked about him quite a good deal, and many of them had visited him. It was for this reason that the girls had been attracted.

"Fair young lady, be seated!" he said in his peculiar English. "I sense that you are a strange and unusual subject."

Ethel sat down on the little stool, and looked at the crystal in a rather scared sort of way. It seemed to her imagination that the hidden fires were leaping more than ever, that there were figures appearing amidst the flickerings. Or did she just imagine it?

"Your name," said the mystic, "is Ethel Church."

"How—how did you know?" faltered Ethel.

In the rear Winnie Pitt smiled to herself. She remembered that she had incautiously called her companion by name a moment or two earlier. Zuma's magic was not so wonderful, after all.

"I know all!" replied Zuma impressively. "I see all. Nothing can escape from my vision. You are the daughter of Mr. Walter Church, and I can see him. An upright man, with hair grey at the temples. He wears a small moustache, and his smile is a wonderful smile. Yes, yes, I see him. And he is accompanied by a lady—a tall and stately lady with soft brown eyes and a queenly carriage."

"Oh!" murmured Ethel, amazed.

For Zuma had described her mother and father very accurately. Yet how was it possible? How could this man have seen her parents?

"I see an old home," continued Zuma, his voice dreamy and droning. "It is an ancient Tudor mansion, with oaken beams, latticed windows, and quaint gables. There are yew-trees along the drive, and there are willows near the terrace. Yes, yes. And lawns—green, smooth lawns, with an Alpine garden. Very pretty—very stately!"

"It's—it's my home!" murmured Ethel, looking at Zuma in dread.

"Well I'm blessed!" murmured Winnie, equally surprised.

"Walking across the lawns I see a figure—a dim, indistinct figure, it is true," continued Zuma. "He is a thin man, with one shoulder lower than the other. He wears glasses, and his face is bronzed and wrinkled, although a paleness is showing itself on his sunken cheeks. I cannot see very distinctly now—"

"Oh!" murmured Ethel. "It's—it's Uncle Geoff! And Uncle Geoff is dead!"

"Yes," said the mystic, without removing his gaze from the crystal. "Yes, I am looking upon the spirit form of your Uncle Geoffrey. He died from some dread malady four years ago. None could explain what had struck him down. It was a hidden disease—a dreadful unexpected illness, and then—"

"Don't—don't!" cried Ethel chokingly. "Oh, how do you know all this?"

"I know all!" replied Zuma unemotionally. "You have a brother—a youth named Walter. Even now he is at the boys' school, not far distant. Ah, there is much that I could tell Walter. I could explain wondrous things to him—for in his future there is a tremendous event. I cannot tell it now—I cannot see it fully. I must have the boy here before the crystal will disclose its secret. But the future is fraught with strange events for him. Events that are not entirely unconnected with his Uncle Geoffrey, who is now dead."

"I—I think I've heard enough!" faltered Ethel. "Oh, Winnie, please let us go!"

She turned appealingly to Winnie Pitt, and Winnie could see that she was pale and excited. And so, a minute later, the two girls found themselves outside—under the open sky, and with the keen wind blowing in their faces.

"Oh, thank goodness!" murmured Ethel, taking a deep breath.

It was good to be out in the open again—to feel the air blowing on her cheeks.



CHAPTER 4.

Handforth Doesn't Approve!

ETHEL! Whatever is the matter?"

Irene Manners asked the question as she ran up to the two girls who had just come out of the tent. Winnie Pitt

was looking rather excited, but Ethel Church was positively pale and agitated. Her eyes were full of wonder and fright.

"I—I don't know!" she faltered. "It was all so—so uncanny!"

"Oh, but these people are always full of bluff and nonsense," said Irene. "They only guess things—"

"But they don't!" insisted Ethel. "It wasn't guesswork at all. This man described my father and mother—my home! He told me about poor Uncle Geoff, who died three or four years ago! Oh, I can't believe it! How did he know? How? How could he know?"

In her agitation, Ethel was talking quickly and almost incoherently. It was Winnie who told the other two girls what had happened inside the tent.

"Well, it's jolly queer, of course," said Irene, at length. "I don't see how this Zuma fellow could have known anything

about you, Ethel. Perhaps there's something in these seers, after all."

"There must be something in them," said Ethel. "And there was his reference to my brother, too. What does he know about Walter? He was awfully mysterious. I shan't rest until Walter has been to him, and has heard——"

"Ted won't let him go," said Irene. "You know what Ted is, obstinate and stubborn."

"But he must let him go!" said Ethel fiercely. "I tell you I shan't sleep until Walter has been to this man, and has heard what he has to say."

"Well, we'd better go up to St. Frank's, and find your brother," said Doris. "And if Ted interferes, we'll squash him. There are four of us, and we can hold him back by force, if necessary."

"It won't be necessary," said Winnie Pitt dryly. "Irene has only got to give Ted one of her special glances, and he'll melt like butter in a summer sun."

"Oh, cheese it!" said Irene, colouring.

They wanted to share Ethel Church's agitation, but somehow, they couldn't quite manage it. In some manner, that old fortune-teller had spoofed her. That was the general verdict. It seemed impossible to believe that Zuma had really seen all those things in his crystal.

As it happened, Handforth & Co. were in the Triangle when the girls paused in the gateway of St. Frank's. They came at once, in answer to a hail. Handforth was looking stern and cold.

"Well?" he asked disapprovingly. "Did you have twopenn'orth with the old fakir?"

"Yes!" said Irene. "And he's a wonder!"

"Piffle!" said Handforth. "I—I mean—— Sorry, Irene! I—I didn't quite mean—— But, dash it, you don't seriously believe——"

"There's something very strange about the old man, Ted," put in Ethel Church gravely. "I don't believe he's such a fraud as you imagine. I want Walter to go down at once, and to——"

"You want old Churchy to sit before that Zuma chap?" interrupted Handforth darkly.

"Yes. It's very urgent——"

"I'm awfully sorry, Ethel, but it can't be done!" interrupted Handforth. "I don't approve of these tricksters. They may be able to pull wool over your eyes, but I'm not so green!"

"Thank you," said Ethel quietly.

"Oh, I say! I—I didn't mean to say that you were green!" said Handforth hastily.

"But I can't allow Church to go——"

"That's very awkward!" interrupted Church. "Do you happen to be the Head, or my housemaster, or somebody like that? If Ethel wants me to go, Handy, I'll jolly well go!"

"Why, you—you——"

"And you can eat coke," went on Church, looking rather anxiously at his sister. "What's the matter, Ethel? I believe that old chap has scared you! I'll go down there, and tick him off! It's a bit thick when these fellows

practise their unhealthy rubbish on susceptible schoolgirls——"

"Oh, don't be silly, Walter!" interrupted his sister. "I'm not susceptible like that—until now I've never believed in these fortune-tellers. But this man seems to know so much!"

"They always do!" growled Handforth.

But he had to admit that he was rather surprised, a minute or two later, after Ethel had told him of her interview with Zuma. Church himself was very astonished, indeed.

"It's rummy," he said, scratching his head. "I wonder how the dickens the old boy knew anything about us? And how did he get that information about Uncle Geoff? He's never seen either of us in his life before!"

"Perhaps there's something in these—these seers," said Ethel. "At any rate, Walter, I want you to go down now. Zuma told me that there is some tremendous event in your life, but he couldn't tell me what it was. He must have you there, so that your presence can influence the crystal!"

"What rot!" said Handforth gruffly. "I can't help it, girls! Even if I seem rude, I've got to say it. It's all tommy rot! These fortune-tellers make a business of it, don't forget. They pick up bits of information here and there, and put two and two together, and then they bring out the most marvellous facts! How do you know that one of the other girls—Joan Tarrant, for example—hasn't sat before his rotten crystal? Perhaps she gave that information about your family, Church."

"It's possible," said Church slowly. "But, still, sis wants me to go down, so I'm going."

"Well, I don't approve of it!" repeated Handforth. "And if you go, I'll biff you."

"No, you won't, Ted!" said Irene sweetly. "It's for Ethel's sake, remember. You wouldn't be so ungentlemanly!"

"Oh, well! I—I—— If you put it like that——"

Church went off while they were still talking, borrowing a bicycle for the purpose. And within five minutes he was outside Zuma's tent, feeling very sceptical. He didn't believe that Zuma was a real mystery man. There was some spoof somewhere. Perhaps he would be able to find it out when he went inside.

There were a few village children hovering about, looking open-eyed at the picturesque doorkeeper. Church went boldly forward, and the flap was opened for him. He blinked in the dim light within, and then nodded grimly. It was very much like what he had expected. He sat down on the low stool, and looked at the crystal with interest. Zuma was gazing at him searchingly—closely. But for some moments not a word was spoken.

"Well," said Church, getting impatient, "can you see anything in that giddy goldfish bowl of yours?"

Zuma raised a solemn hand.

"Your name, youth, is Walter Church!" he said impressively.

"Marvellous!" said Church. "My sister told you I was coming down, didn't she? You'll have to do better than that, old man, if you want to make me believe in you!"

"I see you in the crystal!" went on Zuma, his voice dreamy and far away. "You are playing a wondrous game—a game with a ball at your feet."

"Footer, eh?" said Church. "Well, that's not a very smart shot. I generally play footer on a half-holiday."

"I see you falling," continued Zuma. "You are falling—falling—"

He broke off, uttering a strange exclamation in a foreign tongue. He bent closer to the crystal, and searched it anxiously. He passed his hands over the smooth surface, and then sat back again.

"Strange!" he murmured. "There is nothing—nothing!"

"What do you mean—nothing?" asked Church.

"I see you playing this game—I see you falling—but afterwards there is a blank!" said Zuma, his voice more impressive than ever. "A blank! Youth, the crystal is bad—very bad! It tells me nothing! A short period of activity to come, and then—emptiness!"

The old seer shuddered.

"Go!" he muttered hoarsely. "You are a bad subject! I dare not tell you what your future will bring! There is nothing but emptiness—emptiness! Go!"

And Church went—feeling very unsettled.



CHAPTER 5.

Church Chaffed!

CHURCH didn't know how much to pay the attendant for his interview, but he handed the man a shilling, and then passed out into the open air. He stood for a moment looking back at the picturesque little tent.

"Rummy!" he muttered, frowning. "What on earth did the old boy mean?"

He rubbed his left wrist thoughtfully. There was a slight itch there, and he thought for a moment that he must have pricked himself on something. But there was no sign of any puncture or scratch. Church did not give the matter a second thought, and he did not even feel any irritation after that first moment. He dismissed the matter entirely.

He did not like Zuma's treatment of him.

"I've a good mind to go back, and ask him what the dickens he means!" he murmured, hesitating. "He could see me playing football in that rotten crystal of his—playing football, and then he could see me falling. And after that—blank!"

It was very unsettling, and Church was sorry that he had come. Of course, he didn't believe in this old seer. He was only a fakir, after all—still—

"I don't like that 'blank' business," muttered Church, as he went towards his bicycle. "I always thought these fortune-tellers made up a lot of spoof stuff about a fellow. I thought he'd see me falling in love with somebody, and then marrying into a rich family, or pinching a loaf of bread to feed my starving children! These chaps are always full of spoof like that! But Zuma says he can see nothing! Anybody might think I was going to peg out after that fall!"

He frowned again, and slowly rode off on his machine. When he got to the school gates, he found Handforth and McClure and the four Moor View girls still there. They looked at him eagerly as he got off his bicycle.

"Well?" asked Ethel, running up. "What did he say, Walter?"

"Nothing!" growled Church.

"Nothing?" she echoed. "But he must have said *something*."

"Well, it amounted to nothing, anyhow," amended Church. "He told me to go—said he didn't like me as a subject. Anybody might think I was going to die, according to the way Zuma spoke!"

"Oh!" murmured Ethel, looking at her brother anxiously.

"Let's hear about it," said Handforth authoritatively. "Come on, Churchy, old man! Tell us all about the interview!"

Church did so, and his two chums grinned widely after they had heard all. Even the girls were smiling—except Ethel.

"Why, you silly chump!" said Handforth. "There's nothing to worry about!"

"But—but that blank—"

"That blank is easy enough to explain away," went on Handforth firmly. "Old Zuma had told Ethel all about your family; my son, and he didn't know anything more. So what did he do? He said that everything was blank!"

"That's it!" grinned McClure. "He couldn't tell you anything about yourself, Church, and he couldn't say anything more about your family, so he pretended to be very wise."

"All the same, it's rummy!" said Church, frowning.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

His chums roared with laughter.

"Rummy be blowed!" said Handforth boisterously. "I'm surprised at you, Churchy—being spoofed like that! Fancy taking any notice of that piffle!"

"But it may not be piffle, Ted!" said Ethel quickly.

"Awfully sorry, old girl, but it can't be anything else!" replied Handforth. "Just analyse the evidence. Old Zuma says that he can see Church in the crystal—he can see him playing footer. Well, is that very marvellous? It wasn't a particularly brilliant



Church gazed apprehensively at all the bottles, tins and phials standing on the table, but Handforth only grinned reassuringly. "I'm going to cure you, Church, old man!" he said confidently.

shot for the old rascal. All schoolboys play footer. It was a pure guess."

"Of course it was," agreed Irene, nodding.

"But he said he saw me falling—falling," said Church. "And then—blank!"

"Well, isn't it usual for a chap to fall when he's playing football?" asked Handforth impatiently. "Why, you ass, you never play in a game without falling two or three times!"

"That's true!" admitted Church, brightening a little.

"But—but after that everything is blank!" said his sister.

"Of course it's blank—because Zuma didn't know what to say," grinned Handforth. "So he thought he would look very wise, and put the wind up you. Church, you silly cuckoo, I'm surprised at you. I thought you had more sense!"

"Oh, well——" began Church, colouring.

"But I was wrong!" went on his leader. "My only hat! You're just as susceptible to these spoofing fortune-tellers as any of the girls. You have a big fall, and then—nothing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

They all laughed loudly, and even Church himself began to grin in a shamefaced sort of way.

"Perhaps I was wrong," he admitted. "Only the old fellow was so impressive, you know. It's all very well for you chaps to cackle, but you didn't go into that tent!"

"It's a good thing I didn't!" said Hand-

forth. "Old Zuma would have been dotted on the nose if he had spoken that rot to me!"

"I don't think it's right of you, Ted, to treat it so lightly," said Ethel soberly. "You don't know how mysterious this man is. There's something—something almost uncanny about him. I can't quite describe the effect. And I'm worried, too."

"You shouldn't be, Ethel," laughed Irene. "There's nothing in it at all."

"But how did he know about my father and mother?" insisted Ethel. "How did he know about my home? And Uncle Geoff, too! Poor Uncle Geoff, who's been dead for four years——"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Handforth gruffly.

"It's only the usual stuff that these fortune-tellers trot out. He got the information from somewhere, and spoofed you with it—that's all. Take my advice, and forget the whole beastly incident! These fortune-tellers ought to be shoved in quod! We shall have old Church thinking he's going to die!"

"Rats!" said Church uncomfortably. "I don't think anything of the sort. Only it's—it's rummy, you know!"

"Better look out, old man!" said McClure, with mock alarm. "Great Scott! Look there!"

He pointed dramatically, his voice rising with excitement.

"What's the matter?" asked Church, turning round.

"A black cat just crossed your path!"

said McClure, in an awed voice. "That means bad luck, doesn't it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I always thought it meant good luck!" smiled Irene. "Not that it makes any difference—I don't believe in these silly superstitions. Well, come along, girls, let's forget the whole thing, as Ted says."

"Quite right!" said Handforth approvingly. "It's time we went in to tea, too, you fellows. Care to join us, you girls?"

But Irene & Co. were due back at their own school, and they soon went off. And later on in the evening, Church came in for a good deal of chaff.

In the common-room, and in the passages, juniors met him, and asked him how he was feeling. They told him to be careful of falling, and they warned him against the blankness.

Long before he went to bed he was fed up with the whole business, and he had come to the conclusion that Zuma the Mystic was a public nuisance.



CHAPTER 6.

Something Wrong!

"O easy, old man!" McClure spoke in a protesting voice, and Handforth hesitated, sponge in hand.

"Why should I go easy?" he demanded.

"Well, you might give a chap a chance before you squeeze all that cold water into his face!" said Mac. "Wake him up first, and let him turn out. Of course, if he refuses—"

"I've bawled at him twice, and I've shaken him three times!" interrupted Handforth. "That's enough! I don't approve of laziness in the morning!"

The second rising bell had gone, and Handforth and McClure were already partially dressed. But Church slept on, peacefully ignorant of the fact that a new day had come. He was snuggled down in his blankets, face upwards, and there was a peaceful expression on his face as he breathed evenly and regularly.

"Give him another shake!" urged Mac. "Don't be so beastly ready with your cold sponges, Handy! He's not looking very well this morning."

"What?" said Handforth, staring at Church.

"May be my fancy, but he looks a bit pale to me," said McClure, looking closer at Church. "Anyhow, we'll give him another dig."

Before Handforth could squeeze out the sponge, McClure seized Church by the shoulder, and shook him vigorously. There was no result. Church still slept on, as though nothing had disturbed him. McClure desisted at last, frowning in a puzzled way.

"I say, this is funny, isn't it?" he asked, glancing at Handforth. "Keep that sponge away, you ass! There's something wrong with him!"

"What do you mean—something wrong?"

"Well, he won't wake up!"

"That's only laziness!" said Handforth gruffly. "I don't approve—"

"Don't be such a chump, Handy," growled Mac. "You know as well as I do that old Church is generally as alert as a robin first thing in the morning. It's most unusual for him to be sluggish like this. What did he have to eat last night?"

"Nothing but the ordinary supper."

"Well, he's thundering heavy," said Mac, looking at Church with concern. "Come on, Churchy, old man," he added, with another shake. "Wake up, my son! Wake up! Well, I'm jiggered! He lays here just like a log!"

Even Handforth began to get worried now. There was something very significant in Church's extraordinary heaviness. He generally awoke at the first sound of the rising-bell, and there was every reason for Handforth and McClure to be startled. They both shook him now, and Handforth squeezed some of the cold water into his face.

But even this had no immediate effect.

"He's not merely asleep—he's unconscious!" said McClure, in alarm.

"What's the difference, you ass?" said Handforth. "Everybody's unconscious when they're asleep, aren't they?"

"Yes, but we can't seem to wake him—Hullo! Good egg! He's stirring a bit!"

Handforth had squeezed some more water over Church's face, and there was now some evidence of life. Church was moving, and he slowly opened his eyes. He blinked in a dazed fashion, closed his eyes again, and took a long, long breath.

"About time, too!" said Handforth tartly. "Wake up, Church, you lazybones!"

Church took no notice. He appeared to sink back into his heavy sleep again, and only started up when Handforth squeezed some more water over him.

"Hullo!" he muttered thickly. "What the— Eh? Here, cheese it!"

He sat up with some difficulty, and looked at Handforth without recognition. But gradually, second by second, his full senses came to him, and he yawned prodigiously.

"Time to get up?" he asked, in a curiously listless voice. "My goodness! I'm tired! I feel as if I hadn't had a wink!"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Handforth. "Haven't had a wink, eh? Why, you lazy fathead, you've been sleeping like a log!"

"We got the wind up, Churchy!" put in McClure. "We couldn't wake you! We thought you were ill, or something!"

"Ill?" Church repeated. "Of course I'm not ill!"

He yawned again—he yawned repeatedly, in fact. His eyes felt twice their normal size, and it was as much as he could do to keep his lids open, and when he got out

of bed he felt very unsteady for a few minutes. However, by the time he was fully dressed, this had passed, and he was practically himself, except for a dull headache.

"I don't seem quite right this morning," he said, in that same listless way. "Something must have disagreed with me, I suppose. I'm not ill, of course, so don't you chaps say I am. I'm booked to play in the House match this afternoon, and—"

"You're not ill enough to cut the match," interrupted Handforth. "In fact, you're not ill at all. It's only plain laziness. If you're like that to-morrow morning, my lad, I shan't waste any sympathy over you. I'll swamp you with cold water!"

"You haven't caught a cold, I suppose?" asked McClure.

"No, of course I haven't," said Church. "I tell you I'm all right."

"That's rot," said Mac. "You can't be all right."

Church looked uncomfortable.

"I'm not ill, anyhow," he said stubbornly. "For goodness' sake, keep this to yourselves, you chaps. I don't want to be ordered into the sanny. I hate the sanny. Once they get you in there, you never know when they're going to let you out. I feel sort of numb, you know—the same as your foot feels when it's 'gone to sleep.' But I feel like it all over."

"I don't wonder at it, either!" growled Handforth. "You'll be all right in another few minutes, my lad! Come along downstairs, and we'll get a football, and punt it about. That'll put some life into you!"

Out in the Triangle, they came face to face with Reggie Pitt, of the West House, who was out strolling in the bright wintry sunshine with Jack Grey.

"Hallo, Church!" said Reggie, with mock surprise. "Still alive, then?"

"Eh?" said Church, with a start.

"According to all the reports yesterday, there was going to be a blank in your life!" said Pitt. "We were rather afraid—"

"Ass!" growled Church, turning red.

But Reggie Pitt's words had rather startled him. He remembered Zuma the Mystic again. That interview with Zuma had only taken place yesterday—and now, this morning, for the first time in his life, Church had found great difficulty in awakening!

A coincidence, of course, he decided. But, all the same, it was significant!

CHAPTER 7.

The Collapse!



P

UNTING a football about proved to be an excellent tonic. By the time the breakfast-bell rang, Church was feeling practically himself again. The brisk

exercise had done him a world of good, and he

was ready to laugh at those fears which had beset him only half-an-hour earlier.

"You're looking better now, old man," said McClure, as they walked in.

"Oh, chuck it!" grinned Church. "Forget all about it. I don't know why I was feeling so heavy, but I'm as right as a trivet now. Got an appetite like a horse, too."

"That's good!" said Handforth. "You can always trust me to give you the right treatment. No need to report to a doctor when you're ill—just tell me!"

They grinned, and went into breakfast. It was noticed, however, that Church did not eat so heartily as usual. His appetite, as a matter of fact, had faded to a great extent. At the first taste of food, he lost his desire for it. He couldn't understand this, either. In spite of all his good intentions, he kept thinking about Zuma. He could see the old mystic now—he could see the crystal. The beastly thing was playing on his mind.

"Oh, rats!" he muttered to himself. "I shall only get morbid if I keep on thinking like this!"

He tried to convince himself that he was merely the victim of his own imagination, but during morning lessons Mr. Crowell found it necessary, more than once, to pull him up sharply.

"I do not think you are quite well, Church," said the Form-master. "You are not usually so inattentive as this."

"I—I'm all right, sir!" stammered Church, with a start.

"Then, if you are all right, Church, I shall be compelled to give you an imposition," said Mr. Crowell firmly. "This is the third time that I have been compelled to speak to you for inattention. You seem to be very lackadaisical. Stand up, Church!"

"Yes, sir!"

Church tried to stand up, but a surprised expression came into his eyes. That numbness was assailing him again. It was spasmodic. Sometimes he would be quite normal, and then, suddenly, his limbs would feel lifeless. It was only with great difficulty that he struggled to his feet, and stood there, clutching at the desk.

"I am quite sure that you are unwell, Church," said Mr. Crowell, looking at him searchingly. "Are you in pain at all?"

"No, sir."

"I hope you are telling me the truth, Church?"

"Yes, I am, sir—honour bright!"

"Then you will sit down again, and if there is any more inattention on your part I must detain you for extra lesson this afternoon," said Mr. Crowell. "That will do."

Church sat down, much relieved. Mr. Crowell had a suspicion, at the back of his head, that Church had been fighting, and that he was stiff; or perhaps he had been indulging in some rash escapade, and had bruised himself. At all events, Church managed to

apply himself rigidly to work during the rest of the morning, and he avoided trouble.

Nipper approached him when lessons were over.

"Nothing wrong, Church, is there?" asked the Remove skipper.

"No, of course not," said Church gruffly. "I wish you fellows would leave me alone! You're only trying to rag me—just because of that fortune-teller yesterday!"

"Nothing was further from my thoughts, old son," said Nipper. "But you're booked to play for the Ancient House in to-day's match, and I was wondering if I should take your name off the list and give somebody else a chance. You won't give a good account of yourself if you're seedy."

"He's all right!" said Handforth. "It's only his silly imagination. I've a good mind to go down to that beastly fortune-teller, and tick him off!"

"You can't do that," said Nipper. "The man's only earning his living—and if his clients choose to take any notice of his nonsense it's their fault."

"I'm not taking any notice of it!" roared Church, exasperated. "And there's nothing wrong with my imagination, either! I'm all right in the main!"

"In the main?" repeated Nipper.

"Well, I'm all right altogether!" said Church. "Now and again I feel sort of numb—I don't know why. And I go a bit dizzy, too. But it's nothing, really."

"Dizzy?" said Handforth. "That seems to indicate indigestion, my lad! You've been eating something that doesn't agree with you! What you need is a strong dose of medicine—"

"I don't want any medicine—and I won't take any medicine!" interrupted Church. "Blow you! I don't want to be coddled up! Leave me alone, and I'll be all right—and I can play in the match, too!"

And later on, when the Ancient House Junior Eleven turned out, Church was wearing his colours. The match was only a minor one—a House game between Nipper and his men and the West House fellows.

"Feeling all right, Church?" asked Nipper cheerily, as they all went on to the field.

"Yes, thanks!" said Church stiffly. "How many more times must I tell you?"

"Sorry, old man," smiled Nipper.

He could see that Church was very touchy on the point of his health. But Nipper had not asked without reason. For, to tell the truth, Church was not looking quite himself. His cheeks were much paler than usual, and there were hollows under his eyes. Indeed, if such a thing had not been impossible, one might have said that he was looking thinner and shrunken. But this was quite out of the question—since he had been in normal health the previous day.

The game started, and Church soon proved that he was in tip-top form. Perhaps he exerted himself just a little too much, in an

effort to prove to his fellow players that he was fit for the game.

At all events, after about twelve minutes' play, and just when Church was passing the leather to the outside-right, after a smart run, a rather startling thing happened. Church stumbled without any apparent reason. His knees sagged, and he crumpled up into a limp heap.

There was something very strange about this collapse.

He hadn't tripped on anything, and no other player was near him at the time. Yet he sagged over and fell. And when he tried to rise, he seemed unable to do so. Nipper and Handforth and several others came running up, full of concern.

"Ricked your ankle, old man?" asked Nipper.

"No!" muttered Church. "I—I—"

His voice trailed away, and he staggered to his feet. But the next moment he fell again—fell just as though consciousness had left him. He dropped to the ground like a limp bundle, and now his face was as pale as a sheet. Without question there was something radically wrong with Walter Church!



CHAPTER 8.

Handy Means Well!

REAT Scott!"

"What the dickens is the matter with him?"

"He seems as weak as a rat!"

The juniors stared down at Church in astonishment. And Church himself was attempting to sit up again—and his eyes were full of wonder.

"I—I can't understand it!" he muttered huskily. "I came over dizzy, you know—and everything went sort of black."

Somebody gave a yell.

"I say, what about Zuma?" he shouted. "Old Zuma told Church that he'd play football, and that he'd have a fall—and that everything would then be blank! Pretty rummy, isn't it?"

"Don't be an idiot!" said Nipper gruffly. "It's only a coincidence—"

"Is it?" murmured Church. "Yes, blank! That's right! Everything *did* go blank! But I'm better now—I think I shall be able to play again—"

"No, you won't my son!" interrupted Nipper. "You'll go straight indoors and lie down. You're not well—even if you think you are. We'd better call some of the other chaps, and get them to take him indoors."

"Not likely!" interrupted Handforth. "I'll take him indoors!"

"But you're playing, you ass!" said De Valerie.

"No, I'm not," replied Handforth promptly. "I stand down from the game—and somebody

else can keep goal. Old Churchy isn't well, and I've got to look after him. He's one of my chums, don't forget!"

"Yes, but the game——"

"Hang the game!" said Handforth curtly.

The others glanced at one another, and wondered. It was impossible for them to appreciate the bond of friendship which existed between Handforth and his chums. They only viewed the thing on the surface: Handforth was ever ready to punch Church on the nose, to snap him up, and generally to treat him roughly. And yet here he was, giving up his position as goalkeeper in the game, so that he could accompany Church indoors, and see that he was made comfortable!

And with Handforth football was a sort of religion. All that day he had made light of Church's indisposition—but his actions, now, were proving that he had been deeply concerned at heart. Otherwise he would have been content to see two or three of the spectators take Church indoors.

"Shall I come, too?" asked McClure anxiously.

"No, there's no need for you to miss the game, old son," said Handforth gruffly. "I'll look after him. Come along, Church, my lad!"

"Don't trouble!" muttered Church, a bewildered look in his eyes. "I—I don't know what's wrong! I'm not really ill. I feel as healthy as anything, but—but I don't seem to have any strength in my legs. I shall be all right again in a minute or two. It only comes on like that at intervals——"

"You'd better report to Dr. Brett," said Nipper firmly. "It may be serious, Church."

"It isn't!" insisted Church. "I tell you I'm all right!"

Some of his colour had come back now, and most of the footballers were of the opinion that Church had been more frightened than unwell. It was generally acknowledged that the fortune-teller's prophecy was playing upon his imagination. So the unfortunate Church received very little sympathy from the Remove in general.

But Handforth, by some sort of instinct, seemed to know. He took Church's arm, and they both went off the field together. None of the others knew how heavily Church leaned upon his leader's arm. Indeed, but for Handforth's assistance, he would not have been able to walk at all. But Handforth knew the truth, and when they got to Study D he put Church into the easy-chair and looked at him hard.

"Now then, Church, old man," he said quietly, "what's the trouble?"

"I—I don't know!" said Church, in a rather scared voice.

"You keep coming over weak?"

"Yes," muttered Church. "It's rotten, you know! I—I can't make it out! I've never been like it before, and——"

"You need dosing up!" said Handforth firmly. "That's the trouble with you, Church! You're generally run down, by the look of it—and I think there's a touch of biliousness and indigestion mixed up with it. I'll soon put you right!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Church listlessly.

"I shan't tell you—but you'll soon see," replied Handforth. "You stay here until I come back. Don't move! Stay in that chair, and have a little nap. Promise?"

"Yes, I'll promise," said Church in a dull voice.

Handforth went out. In the corridor he paused, and examined his available cash. He was rather pleased to find that he had over thirty-five shillings on him.

"I shall need it, too," he muttered. "Perhaps I'd better dig up old Archie, and borrow a fiver from him. It's better to be on the safe side."

He was very anxious about his ailing chum, and he had decided that there was only one way in which to restore Church to his normal health. Obviously, there was something very wrong with the Remove junior, and drastic measures were necessary. Neither Church nor McClure received any sympathy from Handforth while they were in ordinary health; but as soon as they were ailing, Handforth became like a ministering angel. A rather clumsy one, it is true, but he meant well.

He hurried along to Study E, and found Archie Glenthorne sprawling on the lounge, gazing idly into the fire.

"Hallo, old cherub!" remarked Archie. "I rather thought you were pushing the old leather about on Little Side. Footer, and all that sort of rot, what? However, sit down and make yourself at home."

"Archie, I want you to lend me a fiver!" said Handforth briefly.

"Absolutely!" replied Archie Glenthorne. "On the spot, old bean! A tenner if you wish——"

"No, five'll do, thanks," said Handforth. "Poor old Church is ill, and I've got to look after him. I need some money——"

"Pray don't mensh, old tulip!" interrupted Archie, pained. "As one gentleman to another, the good old pocket-book it absolutely open. I'm frightfully sorry to hear that Church is so frightfully bad."

Handforth did not wait to hear any of Archie Glenthorne's long-winded comments. He hurried out, obtained his little Austin Seven from the garage, and then sped down to Bellton. His objective was the chemist's shop in the village, and in this establishment he remained for at least a quarter of an hour. And when he emerged he carried a huge parcel. Triumphant he placed it in the Austin, and then sped back towards St. Frank's. It seemed that the unhappy Church was to have no lack of medicine!

CHAPTER 9.

Too Much Medicine!



"UGH!" said Church, with a shudder.

"If it tastes nasty, all the better!" said Handforth approvingly.

"All good medicine has a rotten taste. I think I'd better give you another dose——"

"No, I don't want it!" said Church desperately. "One spoonful is enough, you ass!"

"All right; but you're going to have one spoonful of this every hour," said Handforth, looking at the directions on the bottle. "This stuff is called 'Veeder-Vite, the Vital Vitamin.' It'll put new life into you, my lad!"

Church turned a pair of despairing eyes towards the table. He had heard various chinks, as though of glass, and now he started forward in his chair with a wild cry.

"What—what's all that?" he asked in horror.

"Eh? What's all which?"

"All that stuff on the table?" asked Church.

Handforth looked at the table with satisfaction. There were at least a dozen bottles standing there, to say nothing of various ornamental tins and phials of tabloids.

"I'm going to cure you, Church, old man," said Handforth confidently.

"If you're not jolly careful, you'll kill me!" said Church. "Look here, Handy, be reasonable! I'm not so ill as all this. It's only a rummy kind of—of weakness, and it only comes on now and again. It's a complete mystery to me! I've never been like it in all my life before. I feel well enough bodily, but yet I feel as weak as a rat every now and again."

"It's some kind of hidden fever," said Handforth significantly.

"Fever be blowed!" retorted Church. "I haven't a temperature, you chump! I'm as cool as you like, and, except for a headache, I feel almost normal. It's so jolly mysterious——"

"Well, never mind about it being mysterious," interrupted Handforth. "Take this."

"Take what?"

"This is wonderful stuff," said Handforth, as he poured out a spoonful of thick, black-looking syrup. "'Dr. Turner's Cough Elixir—Guaranteed to cure any cold within twenty-four hours.'"

"But I haven't a cold!" said Church desperately.

"That doesn't matter—this medicine will do you a lot of good!"

"My dear chap——"

Church felt too weak to protest. He took the Cough Elixir, and found that it was quite pleasant. He sank back again into his chair, and watched Handforth with a kind of fascinated apprehension. Edward Oswald

was picking up the bottles and examining them one after the other. He did so with a kind of gloating eagerness.

"Here we are!" he said. "'Bossop's Pills'! You'll have one of Bossop's Pills, and a spoonful of 'Allright's Chest Tonic.' Then after that you must have half a wine-glassful of 'Mother Thomas' Throat Tincture.' That ought to keep you going until tea-time!"

"But—but——"

"And after tea I'll give your chest a rub with this 'Lightning Lotion,'" went on Handforth. "Just to make sure, I think we ought to give your back a dose of 'Zebto Embrocation.'"

Church was feeling very ill, but he managed to pull himself together with some show of strength.

"I've had enough!" he said hoarsely. "Look here, Handy, you can't shove all those rotten things down my throat. I won't take them. I don't want any more mixtures or pills or elixirs."

"But these things will do you good!" urged Handforth.

"They'll jolly well polish me off, if you give them to me all at once like this!" said Church bitterly. "Clear off, Handy! I thought you were going to let me have a nap? I—I'm not feeling up to the mark, I'll own, but you're making me worse!"

Handforth looked at his chum reproachfully.

"Is this all the thanks I get for going out of my way to buy half the chemist's stock?" he asked. "I don't blame you, of course—you're not feeling quite yourself——"

"Sorry, Handy, but you know what I mean!" muttered Church. "I don't want to upset you."

"Don't worry!" interrupted Edward Oswald. "I'm not worried. All patients are the same; they're all peevish and obstinate. They never like taking medicine when it's handed to them. But I'm firm. You won't be able to get round me, my lad. If I say you've got to take a dose of medicine—well, you've got to take it!"

"Yes, but——"

"There are no 'buts' about it!" interrupted Handforth calmly. "Now get ready—open your mouth. This throat tincture is just what you need."

"My throat's fine!" croaked Church.

"It sounds like it, doesn't it?" said Handforth. "Why, you ass, you're as hoarse as a frog!"

"Well, it's your fault——"

But Church gave it up. The throat tincture was forced down, and after that one of Dr. Bossop's Pills found its way into his interior. Indeed, before very long, he was looking decidedly bilious. Handforth wasn't satisfied until he had administered at least half a dozen different syrups, and the effect upon Church was lamentable. He hadn't been feeling himself all day, but Handforth's

treatment was slowly but surely having its dire effect.

Footsteps sounded out in the passage—many footsteps; a moment later the door of Study D opened softly, and two or three figures crept in. Nipper led the way, followed by Tommy Watson, Reggie Pitt, McClure, and others.

"How's the patient?" asked Nipper gently. "Any sign of— What the dickens! Ye gods and little fishes!"

He stared at the table and then sniffed the air. Study D smelt very much like a hospital, and the array of medicines on the table was a formidable sight.

"My goodness!" said McClure blankly. "What—what's all this?"

"Medicines, you fathead!" said Handforth briefly.

"But—but—"

"Can't you fellows keep away?" demanded Edward Oswald, in a voice that would have disturbed a deaf man. "Can't you see that Church wants to be quiet? What's the idea of barging in, and kicking up all this row?"

"My hat!" said Pitt. "If it comes to row, Handy, you're doing your share! But you don't mean to say that you've been giving the poor chap doses from all these bottles?" he added aghast, as he noticed that most of the bottles had been opened. "Is he still alive?"

Nipper was looking at Church rather anxiously.

"There's not much wrong with him," he went on. "He looks a bit bilious, but otherwise he seems to be all right."

"No wonder he's bilious," said Fullwood, frowning. "You hopeless ass, Handy. We'd better throw all these medicines away before you can injure the patient any more!"

"Hear, hear!" said the others.

And they walked towards the table with purposeful expressions on their faces.



CHAPTER 10.

Plenty of Sympathizers!

HANDFORTH went red with wrath.

"Hi!" he roared.

"You leave these medicines alone!"

"Sorry, old man,

but we must be firm," said Nipper. "We admire your good intentions, and we know that you mean well. But if you give poor old Church any more of this stuff he'll probably languish in the sanatorium for two or three weeks. It'll take him all that time to recover from the effects!"

"But all these medicines are guaranteed!" snorted Handforth. "They're first-class products—"

"We're not saying anything about that, Handy," put in Reginald Pitt. "But we believe in moderation. It's possible to have

too much of a good thing, you know. And we don't want Church to peg out from an overdose of cough mixture, or anything like that. If you leave him alone he'll get well, without any of these giddy concoctions."

"I don't want to leave anything to chance," replied Handforth. "The trouble is, the ass doesn't know what's the matter with him. So I'm giving him a dose out of each bottle. I'm trying all sorts of pills on him. One of these medicines is bound to hit the right spot, and so I shall cure him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The others were amused at Handforth's idea of "curing" his chum. It seemed highly probable that he would only add a few complications to Church's mysterious malady.

"We're sorry, Handy, but we've got to be firm," said Nipper. "You're doing Church more harm than good with all these mixtures."

"Yes, rather!" said Fullwood. "There's nothing wrong with him!"

"How do you know?" demanded Handforth.

"Nothing seriously wrong, I mean," said Fullwood.

"Of course there isn't," agreed Church, trying to smile.

"You be quiet!" ordered Handforth sternly. "You're the patient, and you've got to do as you're told. If you don't do it I'll—I'll—I mean, I'm in charge here, and I won't stand any interference!" He pointed at Church and turned to the others. "Look at him!" he went on. "Look at his pale cheeks—his wild eyes. I tell you the poor chap is pining away!"

The other juniors did not seem very sympathetic. They grinned cheerfully.

"It's only your imagination, Handy, old chap," said Nipper gently. "I'll admit that Church is looking a bit seedy, but what else can you expect? You've been feeding him on medicines and pills and all sorts of things for the past hour, and you've almost drugged him into a condition of coma."

"Into a condition of what?"

"Coma."

"Well, it doesn't matter much about his condition—he's my patient, and I'm dealing with him," said Handforth gruffly. "It's time for him to take his dose of throat tincture—"

"Come on, you fellows!" interrupted Nipper briskly. "Grab all the bottles and boxes you can. We'll make one clean sweep of all this stuff!"

"You leave it alone!" roared Handforth.

"The best thing is to leave Church alone," said Reggie Pitt. "He'll soon recover if you give him a little peace."

And, much to Handforth's indignation, all the patent medicines were swept up and carried away. The door closed behind the crowd of juniors, and Church, at least, breathed a sigh of relief. Handforth and McClure were looking at one another indignantly.

"The rotters!" breathed Handforth. "I spent quids on that stuff, and—and——"

"Perhaps they're right, old man," said McClure. "It's no good giving cough mixture to the patient if he hasn't got a cough. The trouble is, we don't know what's wrong with him. Church, old man, where do you feel the pain?"

Church looked up.

"I don't feel any pain at all," he replied.

"Then what's the matter with you?"

"I don't know."

"If you're ill, you must have some symptoms," urged Mac. "You can't be ill without feeling any pain. What have you eaten lately?"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Church wearily. "I wish you'd leave me alone! Those other chaps were quite right—if you'll only give me a little peace, I shall probably get well again. I—I don't mean to be ungrateful, Handy, but—but—— Oh, well, I feel pretty rotten, that's all."

He closed his eyes, and sank back into his chair. Handforth and McClure exchanged glances again, and decided to humour the patient. Outside, in the lobby, Nipper was talking to Fullwood, and one or two others.

"D'you think we ought to report him to Mr. Lee, or to the doctor?" Fullwood was asking.

"No, I don't think so," replied Nipper. "Church was as happy as any of us yesterday, and he can't be seriously ill. Tummy trouble, I imagine."

"Yes, he looks pretty bilious," agreed Reggie Pitt. "But what else can you expect, after Handy has been feeding him on cough mixtures and throat tinctures? It's so jolly sudden—so unexpected."

"Oh, he'll be all right by the morning," said Fullwood.

The juniors then dispersed, and within two or three minutes they had forgotten Church altogether. Nobody really believed that he was genuinely ill. It seemed so incredible. There was no reason why he should be ill. He hadn't caught cold, and he hadn't developed a fever. He didn't even know what was the matter himself. So how was it possible for anybody else to arrive at the trouble?

Indeed, Church's strange illness was mysterious in the extreme. There seemed to be something sinister about it—something far more terrible than any of the other juniors dreamed!



CHAPTER 11.

The Mysterious Ailment!

"WORRIED, Handy?"

McClure put the question about half an hour later, as the chums of Study D wore sitting at the table, busy with their prep. Edward Oswald Handforth was poring

over his books, gnawing the end of a pencil. He was scowling ferociously at a blank page of his exercise-book, his rugged brow lined with wrinkles. He looked up with a start.

"Eh?" he said, glancing at Mac.

"Worried, old man?"

"This—this history is a beastly tangle," said Handforth gruffly. "I'm always worried with history. So many silly dates!"

McClure made no comment, but he knew perfectly well that Handforth had not been thinking of his history at all. Edward Oswald was worried about Church, and he hadn't given a thought to his prep. yet.

He was greatly concerned over his ailing chum. Church was such a healthy chap as a rule—and this sudden indisposition of his had come like a blow. It was as mysterious as it was unaccountable. There was nothing tangible to go upon, and Handforth felt baffled.

"I wonder!" said Church abruptly.

"Eh? What are you wondering about?" said Handforth, glancing across at him.

"It's so—so funny about my illness," said Church uncomfortably. "Well, it's hardly an illness—I feel all right, in the main. But look what a job you had this morning to wake me up. And then, in the class-room—I felt so stiff and numb that I could hardly get up when Mr. Crowell spoke to me. And then I fell over during that football match——"

"Oh, dry up!" said Handforth. "No good going over it. You'll soon be all right."

"Yes, but there was nothing wrong with me yesterday," went on Church sombrely. "All this has happened since I went to that fortune-teller chap. I can't forget him! He was looking into that crystal of his, and he told me that he could see a game of football. I was playing football. Then he saw me having a fall—and after that everything became blank. What did he mean by that?"

"Nothing!" retorted Handforth promptly.

"But isn't it peculiar——"

"It's just a coincidence!" interrupted Handforth gruffly. "You'd have been just the same, even if you hadn't gone to that rotten fortune-teller. Forget Zuma and all his giddy works! It's your sister's fault, for taking any notice of the beggar!"

"And there's my sister, too," went on Church. "Zuma told her all about Uncle Geoff, and he described our home——"

"Why the dickens don't you get on with your prep, and leave Zuma alone?" interrupted McClure. "There's nothing much the matter with you, Church, old man. Handy and I are not unsympathetic, but there's no need to get the wind up."

"I haven't got the wind up," said Church indignantly.

"You're just a bit seedy, and you'll soon be well," went on McClure. "Get busy with your prep, and give us a chance to do ours."

Church nodded.

"Perhaps it would be as well," he admitted. "I shall only get myself into a



Handforth and McClure stared at Church in scared amazement. The latter was sitting at the table, staring with unseeing eyes at his lesson book. He seemed curiously rigid, and there was an unnatural stiffness in his attitude!

worried state if I keep on thinking. All right, you chaps—carry on. I'm feeling better already."

"And so you ought to," said Handforth. "I gave you plenty of medicine, anyhow! If those fatheads had left all those bottles here, I should have had you cured by this time. But they needn't think they can squash me. I'm going to find those medicines, and I mean to dose you up thoroughly before you get into bed. By to-morrow morning you'll be as frisky as my minor's pet monkey!"

Somehow, Handforth's words did not carry conviction. He spoke in a careless, airy sort of way. But he was glancing at Church all the time—and his glance was worried. Certainly, Church did not look himself. He was not merely the victim of a bilious attack, or any simple ailment like that. Only twenty-four hours had elapsed since he had first become unwell, and during those twenty-four hours the change in him was remarkable.

He wasn't actually thinner, but he looked drawn and wan. His skin had a peculiar darkish tinge under the eyes, and his lips had become curiously bloodless.

Handforth went on with his own prep, and succeeded in forgetting Church for the time being. Prep had to be done—and the only way to do it was to concentrate. So for the next half-hour or so Handforth and McClure worked on, and Study D was very quiet.

"Finished, thank goodness!" said McClure at length.

"So am I—nearly," said Handforth. "Just

a couple of minutes, and I shall— Hallo! What are you day-dreaming about, Church?"

He spoke rather sharply. Church was sitting at the table, pen in hand, with his eyes on his lesson book. He seemed curiously rigid as he sat there. There was almost an unnatural stiffness in his attitude. And his eyes were fixed—strangely, uncannily fixed.

"Church!" said Handforth sharply.

Church did not seem to hear, and he continued to stare at his book.

"Great Scott!" muttered McClure. "What on earth's the matter with him?"

He and Handforth glanced at one another in a scared sort of way. They had been so preoccupied that they hadn't noticed Church during the last twenty minutes. They had believed that he was going ahead with his work. But, instead of that, he was sitting at the table—apparently lost in a deep reverie.

"Church, old man!" said McClure, tapping Church on the shoulder. "Why don't you— Oh!"

He broke off with a sharp exclamation.

"What's the matter?" demanded Handforth, jumping up.

"Nun-nothing!" stammered Mac. "But—but— He seems all stiff!"

"Stiff!" gasped Edward Oswald.

"Feel him!"

Handforth did so, and a frightened look came into his eyes. Church was sitting there, and he was as rigid as a board. He seemed to be oblivious of his chums' presence, and

Handforth ran round the table and jerked him sharply by the shoulders.

"Church!" he shouted frantically. "Churchy, old man!"

But Church made no reply—he remained as stiff and motionless as a mummy.

"Quick!" gasped Handforth. "Get some water! Fetch Mr. Lee, or somebody! The poor chap is in a fit, or something! By George! That's it! He must be having a fit! That's what's been wrong with him all the time—and we never guessed it!"

McClure ran towards the door in a momentary panic. But he checked just before he gasped the handle. For an exclamation of great relief came from Handforth.

"It's all right!" gasped Edward Oswald. "I believe he's coming round! He's suddenly gone all limp—and he's breathing as hard as a walrus! Fetch some water, Mac—we'll soon bring him round!"

McClure turned back, and found that Church was sitting in his chair, lolling back in a limp and listless attitude. His eyes had closed, and his cheeks were paler than ever!



CHAPTER 12.

Worried!

"WHAT — what's the matter?" muttered Church dazedly.

Water had just been sprinkled into his face, and Handforth was gently shaking him by the shoulder. At least, Handforth thought it was a gentle shake. As a matter of fact, it was a vigorous jolt.

"Thank goodness!" said Handy. "We thought you were in a fit, you ass! Why the dickens were you sitting there like that—all stiff and rigid?"

"Was I?" murmured Church. "I—I don't remember! I was doing my prep.—reading that history book—and then everything became sort of black! I—I don't seem to know what happened after that. I feel sort of numb, you know—numb and senseless."

"Senseless?" repeated Handforth. "That's nothing new, of course—"

"I mean, I can't feel things properly," explained Church. "When I took up my pen, I hardly knew it was in my fingers."

"Well, I'm blessed!" said McClure, staring.

They were all puzzled and uneasy. Church himself was in a rare state of anxiety. What was the matter with him? Why did he keep having these peculiar periods of numbness? What could be the cause of them?

"And you don't feel any pain?" asked Handforth.

"No—no pain at all," said Church.

"Well, it's jolly rummy," said Handforth, scratching his head. "It would be a different thing if you had a cold, or if you were sickening for mumps, or if you came out in spots. We should know what to do."

"You just went to sleep over your prep.," said McClure. "Or, at least, you didn't go to sleep, because your eyes were wide open. That's the uncanny part of it—and I don't mind admitting that I'm uncomfortable. I've never known such rummy symptoms. What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know," said Church desperately. "I've never been like it before."

"Have any members of your family been subject to fits?" asked Handforth.

"No, of course not," growled Church. "What a question to ask!"

"Well, I'm only trying to find out the truth," said Edward Oswald defensively. "I don't know much about fits, but I've heard that people go all stiff and rigid. It took Mac and me nearly three minutes to wake you up out of that trance of yours just now. You were like a log! Even worse than you were this morning."

They made no attempt to hide their uneasiness over Church's extraordinary symptoms. It would have been different if he had always been poorly in health. But exactly the opposite was the case. Church had scarcely had a day's illness in his life. He was strong, robust, and muscular. He was a keen cricketer and a hard footballer. It was very seldom, indeed, that he even got a cold.

"Oh, well, it's no good talking about it," said Church, after a while. "There's something the matter with me, but it can't be much. I'm in no pain, and I should only look an ass if I reported to the doctor or to the housemaster. I expect it'll pass over."

"Of course it will," said McClure lightly. "You're one of the strongest chaps in the Remove, Church, old man. It's nothing much—only a kind of—of spasm. You're getting some of your colour back now, anyhow."

"Yes—I feel better," said Church.

He was certainly looking more like himself. Now that his chums had awakened him from that queer condition of a few minutes ago, he was returning to the normal. But nothing could hide the haggard expression in his face, and the strange discolorations beneath his eyes.

"I think I'll go outside for a bit, if you chaps don't mind," he said, getting to his feet. "A breath of fresh air will do me good. I'll just go into the Triangle for a few minutes."

"All right—we'll come with you," said Handforth promptly.

"I'd rather you didn't!" said Church. "Thanks all the same, old man, but—but—"

"But what?"

"Oh, dash it! I don't want all the fellows to be laughing!" said Church uncomfortably. "They think I'm shamming, even as it is. And if you two fellows lead me out as though I were an invalid, there'll only be a lot of comment."

"He's right, Handy, old man," said Mac. "And there's no reason why we shouldn't go alone, either. He's not seriously ill."

Handforth took no notice. He was staring

at the table—at the spot where Church's books lay. There was a smear of blood across one of those books, and it had evidently been freshly shed.

"Have you cut yourself, Church?" asked Handforth sharply.

"Cut myself? Not that I know of——"

"Great Scott!" shouted Handforth. "Look at your hand!"

Church looked down at his hand in astonishment—and with a start of sudden apprehension. What did Handforth mean? A second later he understood. A pen was sticking into his hand—actually dangling! The point had penetrated his skin so far that it hung there. And blood was flowing from the wound. Church plucked it out in amazement.

"That's rummy!" he muttered, with a gulp.

"But didn't you know it?" asked McClure, staring.

"No!" said Church. "I—I didn't feel anything! I suppose I must have put my hand against the pen without knowing it, and it stuck in. It's nothing much—only a little cut."

"You'd better have some ointment on it, all the same," said Handforth. "That ink might be dangerous."

"I don't want any ointment!" growled Church. "I've dug pens into myself before now, and I've never come to any harm. A little ink doesn't matter. Blow it!"

He walked towards the door, but Handforth called him back.

"Just a minute, Churchy," he said, in a strange voice. "Is it an absolute fact that you didn't feel anything? Didn't you really know that you had dug that pen into your hand?"

Church looked round with a worried light in his eyes.

"I'm just as mystified as you are," he said quietly. "Honestly, I didn't feel it! And it dug in pretty deeply, too! I don't know what's the matter with me. It's all so—so strange! I don't know what's up!"

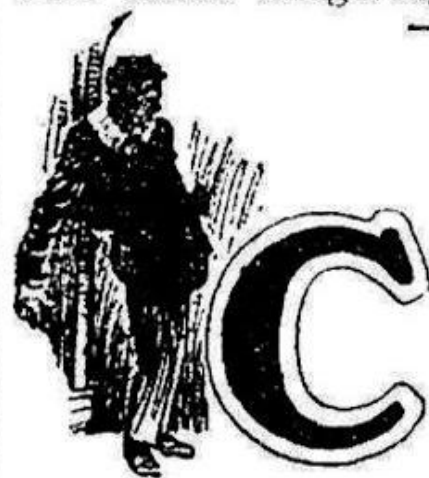
There was a note, almost of despair, in his voice. He went out of the study, and Handforth and McClure glanced at one another. They were more startled than ever. For a few moments there was silence in the study; both were busy with their own thoughts. Then:

"What does it mean?" asked McClure huskily. "I've never seen anything like it! That pen-nib must have gone in about a quarter of an inch to cause blood to flow like this! And he sat at this table and didn't even know it! I think we'd better report to Mr. Lee, Handy! It's getting serious!"

"I think so, too!" said Handforth uneasily. "Poor old Churchy! What the dickens is the matter with him? He's not ill in the ordinary way—he hasn't got scarlet fever, or small-pox, or anything! It's so—so mysterious!"

Handforth had used the right word. Church's malady was indeed mysterious. And

while the rest of the Remove lightly told themselves that Church was just a "bit seedy," Handforth and McClure were filled with dread misgivings.



CHAPTER 13.

The Mysterious Splinter!

CHURCH stood in the doorway of the Ancient House, and he allowed the evening breeze to blow upon his face. It was cold outside—the wind was chilly and biting. It was pitch dark, too. But Church's figure was clear enough in the light which streamed out from the lobby.

He felt better here—in the open air—and he was glad to be alone, too. He looked at that little wound on the back of his hand, and pinched himself. But at first he felt nothing. It was only when he exerted great pressure that he became aware of the slight pain.

"What's the matter with me?" he muttered despairingly.

He stood there without a hat and without an overcoat. Perhaps it was a rash thing for him to do, but this did not even occur to him. All he wanted was the open air, and to be alone. Truth to tell, poor Church was rather frightened. He wasn't afraid of illness, and if he had found himself sickening for measles, or some fever or other, he would have grinned ruefully and would have borne it with a cheerful heart. But this unexpected malady was so mysterious—so unaccountable.

"I don't like to report to the doctor, because there may be nothing in it, after all," he muttered. "What's the good of making a fuss—Hallo! What the——"

He broke off abruptly. A sudden pain had made itself apparent in his left wrist. He looked at it closely, and saw nothing at first. Then he beheld a tiny splinter sticking in his skin.

"Oh, everything seems to be topsy-turvy," he growled. "I stick a pen-nib in one hand, and can't even feel it. And yet a tiny splinter in the other hand gives me a pain like the sting of a wasp! I wonder where I got the splinter, anyhow?"

He plucked the little thing out, and looked at it in the light from the lobby. It was only a little fragment of wood, and he threw it down. He could not even find the place where it had entered his skin. In fact, he thought no more of it.

He half turned as he heard voices, and the next moment Browne and Stevens, of the Fifth, materialised out of the darkness of the Triangle and came marching up the Ancient House steps.

"Alas, Brother Church, what is this I see?" asked William Napoleon Browne, in a pained voice. "What is the meaning of this rash and foolhardy behaviour?"

"What do you mean?" asked Church.

"Surely, brother, you must realise that it is ill-advised for any patient to venture forth into the cold night without even a head-covering?" continued Browne. "I have heard several reports concerning your general health. It has even been whispered that you are sickening for some dread fever or disease, and that we are soon to lose you."

"Oh, chuck it!" said Church.

"I can see, however, that rumour, as ever, is a false and fickle jade," said Browne benevolently. "Kindly correct me if I am wrong, Brother Church, but is it not a fact that you are now feeling very much better?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," admitted Church.

"Splendid!" beamed the captain of the Fifth. "I could detect it in your eye, and in the ruddy glow of your cheeks. However, I must insist upon an immediate withdrawal. You cannot remain out here in this cold air——"

"Rats!" said Church cheerily. "It's the cold air that has done me so much good. I was feeling awfully seedy five minutes ago. But since coming out here I've—— Why, rummily enough, I've completely recovered!"

He spoke in a tone of astonishment. And, really, he was very surprised. He hadn't realised it until this moment, but he was certainly a totally different junior from the one who had come out a few minutes ago.

All the colour had returned to his cheeks, and his eyes possessed the glow of health. The numbness had left his limbs, and his head was clear. He felt curiously happy. Indeed, it was something more than happiness—it was sheer exhilaration. He wanted to laugh—he felt that nothing would give him greater pleasure than to dance and caper about.

"Yes, by Jupiter, I'm as right as a trivet again!" he grinned. "I never knew that fresh air could be so beneficial! I shall have to go and tell Handy and Mac."

"An excellent suggestion, brother," said Browne, with approval. "Congratulations upon your speedy recovery. I must confess that I was greatly worried. As I was saying to Brother Horace, only a moment ago, what should we do without our cheery Church?"

"Were you saying it?" asked Stevens. "I don't remember it."

"No?" said Browne calmly. "Then I must have been about to say it, Brother Horace. Merely a little slip on my part."

Church went into the lobby, and he hurried off into the Junior passage. He was astounded at his inner feelings. He was joyous—exuberant.

"Thank goodness, I'm all right again!" he muttered fervently. "Oh, my goodness! Now that I am well, I can understand how jolly seedy I was! But what the dickens was the matter? I'm as right as rain now—never felt better in my life!"

He experienced those sensations which come over one when a very bad tooth has been extracted. He wanted to laugh at nothing. In fact, he did laugh—he could not restrain himself. And he arrived at the door of Study D just as Handforth and McClure were coming out. He grinned into their faces, and chuckled merrily.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, staring.

"So am I!" nodded Church. "I can't understand it—but I'm O.K. now. That fresh air has done marvels. I feel so strong that I could knock a 'bus over!"

"Good man!" said Handforth, with enthusiasm. "By George, this is great! He's well again, Mac!"

McClure was looking very uneasy.

"Yes, so I see," he said, in a curious voice. "But—but——"

"But what?" demanded Handforth.

"Hang it, I don't want to throw cold water on you, Church, old man—but isn't it a bit too sudden?" asked Mac bluntly. "I don't quite like it when a fellow recovers so rapidly. Not ten minutes ago you were awfully bad."

Church nodded.

"I know I was," he replied coolly. "But I'm all right now. So why should I worry? Perhaps there was something wrong with my heart—or my brain. Who knows? A giddy clot of blood, or something. Perhaps it's got free now, and all the symptoms have gone. Anyhow, I'm not going to worry, and I'm jolly thankful I didn't report to Dr. Brett."

Handforth and McClure were greatly surprised, and they hardly knew what to say. They gave Church some straight looks. Had he been shamming? Not deliberately, of course, but had he been victimised by his own imagination? It looked very much like it!



CHAPTER 14.

A Sudden Revival!

CHURCH jumped a couple of feet into the air, and made a grab at nothing. Then he made a sudden run down the Remove passage, and turned a couple of cartwheels. His chums watched him in amazement.

"My hat!" gasped McClure. "He's gone dotty!"

"Rats!" said Church, assuming an upright position again. "I'm all right, you ass! Only full of spirits! I'm feeling so jolly happy, you know, because I've got better. You don't know how great it feels!"

"It must!" said Handforth. "Or you wouldn't act like a giddy Hottentot!"

Church grinned, and proceeded to do a kind of exaggerated Charleston down the passage. In fact, he was so noisy about it

that Fullwood and Russell came out of Study I and gazed at him in wonderment.

"I thought you were ill!" said Fullwood, staring.

"Ill?" laughed Church. "Only a rumour, my son!"

"So it seems!" said Clive Russell. "There's not much the matter with you, Church!"

"No fear!" agreed Church contentedly. "Never felt better in my life!"

And he certainly looked it. Seldom had he felt so high-spirited as he did now. All the lassitude had gone. His headache was conspicuous by its absence. He was so exhilarated that he was in much higher spirits than usual, for, as a rule, Church was a quiet, sedate sort of fellow. He didn't look it now.

Handforth and McClure didn't know whether to be pleased or scared. They had wanted Church to get well—but to see him well so quickly was something of a shock. There was something rather sinister about this rapid recovery. It seemed to be too good to last. And there was no reason for it, either. Church had only gone out to stand in the open air for a minute or two, and he had come back like this! Never for an instant did Church himself give another thought to that little splinter which he had plucked out of his wrist; and nobody else knew anything about it.

"I don't like it!" murmured McClure. "He seems—well, he seems a bit touched!"

"He's all right!" growled Handforth. "Everybody feels jolly happy after they've suddenly recovered from a fit of the blues. That's what was the matter with him—he wasn't really ill, but only mentally depressed. By George! And I bought all those medicines for him!" he added indignantly. "Anybody might think that he's been spoofing us!"

Church came up to them, and he was radiant.

"Come along!" he said briskly. "Let's go to the common-room."

"Just as you like," said Handforth. "You old fraud! Fancy kidding us that you were ill, and then——"

"Sorry!" said Church. "But I really did feel a bit rummy, you know. I can't understand it even now. But I'm all right, so we'll forget all about it."

He walked off towards the common-room, and Handforth drew in a deep breath. This wasn't like Church at all! Not a word of gratitude for the care and worry that his chums had had! He seemed to take it all as a matter of course. And that light in his eyes—the light of merriment—seemed very false, somehow. There was almost a feverish aspect about it.

"Dash it, I wish he'd remained ill!" said Handforth gruffly. "I'm more worried about him than ever now!"

"Oh, blow him!" said McClure impatiently.

"What the dickens can we do with a chap like that?"

They followed Church towards the common-room, and arrived just after he had burst in. Nipper and Tregellis-West and Archie Glen-thorne and a few others were looking at Church and smiling.

"Good gad!" Archie was saying. "A revival of the good old spirits, what? I take it, laddie, that the tissues are somewhat restored?"

"Rather!" grinned Church. "I'm feeling fine!"

"That's good!" said Nipper. "I rather thought you would be yourself before long, Church. Any idea what was the matter with you?"

"Not the faintest," replied Church. "But it doesn't matter—let's forget all about it. Who's game for punting a football about in the Triangle?"

The Removites stared at him.

"Punting a football about in the Triangle?" repeated Tommy Watson.

"Yes."

"Now?" asked De Valerie.

"Why not?"

"You silly ass, it's dark outside!" said De Valerie. "Besides——"

"That doesn't matter!" laughed Church. "There are plenty of lights from the windows, and we can have a bit of sport. Who's game?"

The juniors were still looking at him in astonishment.

"It strikes me, my son, that you've recovered a bit too much!" said Nipper. "You can't go dashing about the Triangle, punting a football about, when it's nearly bed-time!"

Church chuckled, and turned aside to watch a game of chess. Harry Gresham and Alec Duncan, the chums of Study J, were the players.

"Whose move is it?" asked Church gaily.

"Mine," replied Gresham, glancing up.

"All right—I'll move for you!" said Church, with a yell of laughter.

He suddenly leaned forward and gave the board a push, and sent all the "men" flying over. Then he stood back and shouted with laughter. Gresham and Duncan leapt to their feet wrathfully.

"You silly, cackling ass!" roared Duncan. "Do you call that funny?"

"I'd have had Lim checkmate in another three moves!" shouted Gresham.

"Oh, would you?" said the New Zealand junior. "Don't you be too jolly sure!"

"Here, steady, Church!" said Handforth, coming across and seizing Church by the shoulder. "You're a bit too boisterous, aren't you? Half an hour ago you couldn't lift a giddy finger—and now you're like a monkey out of a zoo! What the dickens is the matter with you?"

Church was standing quite still, staring at the glowing electric lights.

"That's funny!" he said, pointing. "Why have they all gone red?"



Cautiously Handforth and McClure parted the bushes. An amazing scene confronted them. Two cumbly arrayed figures were capering about in front of a fire, and the night air was thick with a pungent, scent-like smoke. Suddenly Handforth stammered, "By Jove!" he hissed. "It's old Zuma!"

"What?" said Handforth.

"The lights!" said Church. "They've all gone red—a flaring, brilliant red! They weren't like it a minute ago, and now—No, I'm wrong!" he added. "They're green! Look! Aren't they funny?"

There was a dead silence in the common-room. The lights had not changed—they were as golden as ever.

"Look here, Church, are you trying to kid us?" asked Nipper sharply. "This isn't funny, you know, old man!"

Church rubbed his eyes and shook himself.

"Sorry!" he said, with an awkward laugh.

"No, they're yellow, the same as usual. Must have been my fancy. Jolly queer, though—I could have sworn they turned red and green."

He blinked again and again, and screwed up his eyes in a puzzled sort of way. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned aside. He found Handforth and McClure near him, and they were looking grim. Handforth, in fact, tapped him forcibly on the shoulder.

"Just a minute, Church, my lad," said Handforth. "I want a word with you!"

But Walter Church walked on, having apparently felt nothing of that heavy tap on his shoulder!



CHAPTER 15.

Handforth Means
to Find Out!

NIPPER barred Church's way. "Just a minute," he said. "Didn't you hear Hand-

forth speaking to you just now?"

"No," said Church. "Was he speaking to me?"

"Yes, and he tapped you on the shoulder, too."

"I didn't know it," said Church, rubbing his eyes again, and taking another look at the lights. "I can't understand why those lights went red and green just now. Why didn't you fellows see it? They've never gone like it before."

"They didn't go like it this time, either," said Tommy Watson bluntly. "What's the idea of kidding us like this, Church? Are you going off your rocker, or what?"

Church passed a hand over his brow.

"I—I don't know!" he muttered. "I—I feel a bit dizzy again. Rats! And I thought I was so well, too. There's a dull sort of feeling in my head, and I can't explain it."

The other juniors looked at him without much sympathy.

"You've been acting the giddy ox, that's

what's the matter with you," said De Valerie. "You'd better go to bed, Church, and sleep it off. Anybody might think you'd been drinking some wine, or something!"

"Perhaps his mater sent him some ginger-wine in a hamper," suggested Brent. "Ginger-wine is considered pretty harmless, but if you drink too much of it, it jolly well gets into your head! I wonder if—"

"Don't rot!" interrupted Handforth. "Church hasn't had any ginger-wine—and you needn't suspect him of trying to spoof you. He's ill! Goodness only knows what's the matter with him, but he's ill!"



Cautiously Handforth
fronted them.
fire, and the night
Handforth

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's ill, I tell you!" roared Handforth.

"Tell that to the marines!" grinned De Valerie. "Why, a minute ago he was so full of spirits that he wanted to play footer in the Triangle!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Must be the dread effect of that old fortune-teller!" chuckled Hubbard. "I expect he cast a spell on the chap!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth started.

"Old Zuma!" he said breathlessly. "By George! I'd forgotten him for the moment!"

I'll bet he's responsible for Church's condition!"

"Cheese it, Handy——"

"I tell you that old Zuma is responsible!" repeated Handforth, with emphasis. "You know as well as I do that Church was as normal as any of us until yesterday evening. All this rummy business started after he had seen that fortune-teller!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My poor old Handy, what an imagination you've got," said Fullwood gently. "There's nothing wrong with Church, except that he's a bit bilious, or sickening for a



parted the bushes. An amazing scene concealed figures were capering about in front of a with a pungent, scent-like smoke. Suddenly "ve!" he hissed. "It's old Zuma!"

cold. It's only a trivial matter. Don't jump to such dotty conclusions."

"He'd better go to bed," suggested Nipper. "He'll probably be all right in the morning."

Handforth glared round at all and sundry.

"You're a callous lot!" he said witheringly. "You're cold and heartless!"

But Handforth was doing the fellows a bit of injustice. They knew nothing of the symptoms that Handforth and McClure had seen. They didn't know how curiously Church had behaved in the study that even-

ing, and Handforth never thought of explaining.

"Yes, old Zuma must have done something to him," went on the leader of Study D. "I don't know what, but I'll jolly well find out! Perhaps he gave him some sort of drug or other—or hypnotised him. By George, that's it! He must have hypnotised him with that rotten crystal of his!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's all to do with his brain!" continued Handforth eagerly. "He's not bodily ill—we know that. It's his brain that's the matter—and nobody else but Zuma can be responsible. Mac, you look after old Churchy until I come back!"

"Where are you going to?" asked McClure.

"Never you mind—but I shan't be long!" said Handforth grimly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

He strode out of the common-room amidst a general chorus of laughter. None of the juniors regarded the matter seriously. Church himself was standing near McClure, looking dazed and bewildered. All his exuberance had gone now. He seemed to be drifting back into his former condition—and drifting very rapidly too.

"How do you feel, old man?" asked Mac anxiously.

"I—I'm all right," muttered Church. "But I'm not quite so lively as I was. I don't know what's the matter, but I feel a bit depressed."

He looked depressed, too. An expression of acute melancholy had come into his face, and there was dull despair in his eyes. And yet there was no reason for this change.

McClure led him gently out, and decided that it would be a good idea to give him another dose of fresh air. Anyhow, the air had done him so much good before that it was worth another trial. McClure little realised that the fresh air had nothing to do with Church's strange spell of high spiritedness.

In the meantime, Handforth was on his way to the village. It hadn't occurred to him to get out his Austin Seven—or even to use a bicycle. It was well after locking-up time, and he had been compelled to climb over the school wall. But he was determined to go and have an interview with Zuma. He wanted to know what Zuma had done to his chum, and he wasn't prepared to take any excuses.

The thing was too significant to be lightly dismissed.

Church had been perfectly all right the previous day—until he had had that interview with Zuma the Mystic. Therefore, Zuma was responsible! It was simply a plain case of putting two and two together.

That was the way Handforth looked at it. And, in his present mood, he was quite prepared to take off his jacket, and hammer Zuma until he confessed what he had done.

The wind was sweeping in chilly gusts over the hedge as he ran down the lane at the double. Overhead there were a number of scudding clouds, with a moon showing fitfully every now and again. It was a cold, cheerless night.

Handforth reached the spot beyond the bridge at last, and he peered anxiously at the roadside. But there was no sign of any tent now. He came to a halt, uncertain and doubtful. Had he made a mistake? Surely this was the place where Zuma had had his tent the previous afternoon?

He went closer, and the moon came out just then. He could see the grass was trampled down and there were several holes in the ground, presumably where the tent pegs and the pole had been. Handforth grunted.

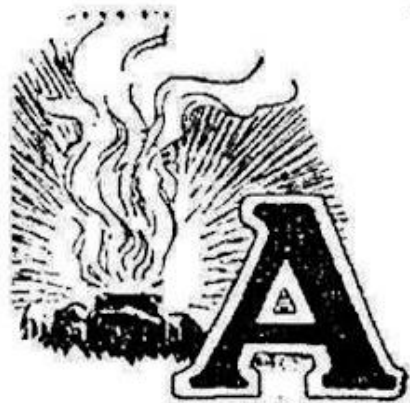
"Gone!" he muttered. "I might have known it. Those chaps always fit off as soon as they've had their fling! I expect he's rooked plenty of money out of the village people, too, with his fortune-telling rot! He's off to the next village by this time."

Edward Oswald was feeling rather disgusted. All his anger had gone. He had meant to demand an explanation from Zuma, but Zuma wasn't on the spot.

For a moment or two, he thought about going into the village, and making a few inquiries. Then he remembered that all the shops would be closed, and that only the public-houses would show any lights. And it wouldn't do for him to go into any of the village inns. A master might spot him, and that would mean explanations. Besides, he would be punished for breaking bounds.

"Rats!" he muttered. "I suppose I'd better get back to the school. But I'll find out about Zuma to-morrow—and I'll jolly well put the police on his track if Churchy isn't any better! If I didn't regard all superstition as rot, I'd say that Zuma was a giddy wizard, and that he had cast a spell over old Church. I never knew such a rummy affair in all my life!"

And Handforth, greatly exercised in mind, turned back, and wended his way towards St. Frank's again.



CHAPTER 16.

The Flickering Light!

DIM form loomed up out of the blackness as Handforth was passing the dark bulk of Bellton Wood. He was on the point of dodging—in case the

other should prove to be a master—when a voice came to his ears.

"That you, Handy?" asked the voice anxiously.

"Yes," said Handforth. "What are you doing down here, Mac?"

McClure came up, breathless and agitated.

"He's worse!" he said briefly.

"What?"

"Soon after you'd gone, I took him along to Study D, and he sank into a chair, and went into a sort of doze," said McClure. "I spoke to him, but he wouldn't answer. He didn't seem to know that I was even there. He's even worse than he was before he got better."

"He didn't get better," said Handforth grimly. "That was only a flash in the pan. He needs some fresh air——"

"I took him out into the Triangle, but it wasn't any good," said Mac. "He asked to go indoors—begged of me to take him inside. He said he was feeling cold, and that his legs were a bit rocky. What is the matter with him?"

"I'd like to have a word with old Zuma!" said Handforth, in a fierce voice.

"Oh, draw it mild!" protested Mac. "It's only a coincidence about that fortune-teller."

"I'm not so sure of it," retorted Handforth. "In fact, I don't believe it. Zuma must have done something to him—mesmerised him, I believe. These old Hindus can do all sorts of rummy things."

"He wasn't a Hindu," said McClure. "I didn't see him, but the girls told me about him. Seems to me that old Zuma is a kind of South American Indian, or something like that."

"Well, what does it matter what he is?" demanded Handforth impatiently. "I don't care if he's South American, or South African, or Indian, or Chinese! He's responsible for old Church's illness. What was Church doing when you left him?"

"Having a nap, I believe."

"You're a chump for leaving him alone," growled Handforth. "You oughtn't to have come away."

"But I was worried—and I wanted to fetch you," said McClure. "In fact, I think we'd better go along to Mr. Lee as soon as we get back, and tell him all about it. The whole thing's getting on my nerves. It's all very well for Church to say that he isn't unwell, and for the other fellows to cackle, but it might be serious."

"We'll see about that when we get back," said Handforth briskly. "Come along!"

But McClure paused a moment later, gazing rather uncertainly towards the wood.

"What's that?" he asked curiously.

"Eh? What's what?"

"I thought I saw a flickering light just now——"

"Great Scott!" said Handforth. "You're not going to imagine things as well as Churchy, are you?"

"Rats! I'm not imagining anything," said McClure. "Look there!" he added, pointing. "Can't you see it now? A sort of ruddy glow—rising and falling. It's not like an ordinary bonfire—it's too orange-coloured."

Handforth stared through the gaunt trees of the wood.

"You're right!" he muttered. "Funny!"

He frowned as he watched. The glow was dimly apparent in the distance, and its origin, no doubt, was in one of the many hollows that existed within the recesses of Bellton Wood. The glow was curiously reflected amongst the trees—a strange, orange-coloured fire, which now and again flickered almost to nothingness, and then rose again with fresh life. There was something rather eerie about it.

"Wonder what it is?" murmured McClure.

"Oh, I don't know—poachers, or something," said Handforth.

"Do poachers hang about the wood at this time of the year?" asked Mac. "And do poachers light fires, just to attract the keepers?"

"H'm! Perhaps not," admitted Handforth, with a puzzled frown. "Not that it matters, anyhow. We ought to get back and see about Church. We can't waste our time—I don't know, though—we might as well have a look into the wood, and see what's happening."

Handforth was torn for the moment. He was very anxious about Church, and he wanted to get back. But he was very curious about this glow, too. He had an inquiring turn of mind, and anything of an unusual nature always attracted him. If there was a mystery, he wanted to get at the root of it, and it was certainly very unusual to see a glow such as this in Bellton Wood.

"Perhaps we'd better not trouble," said McClure, after a short pause. "I think old Church is all right for a little while, but we can't be too sure. He's been acting so strangely this evening that he ought to be watched all the time. For all we know, he might be wandering about the school, turning more cartwheels, or something. My only hat! I never knew him do a thing like that before! And the way he knocked over that chess-table, too! Without any reason, you know. Let's get back to him."

This was just the kind of talk to make Handforth stay.

"No; we'll have a look into the wood," he said. "It won't take us more than five minutes—that light isn't very far off. Come along, but don't make any noise."

They broke through the hedge, and soon found themselves amidst the leafless trees. Underfoot there was a thick carpet of dead and rotting leaves. They made utterly no sound as they padded over this spongy substance, and as they penetrated further into the wood, so the glow became more pronounced.

"It's over there!" breathed Handforth, at length. "Down in that hollow, where there's a kind of gully."

"Yes, I know the place," murmured McClure. "There's a sort of cliff there, too, and some old caves, aren't there? We've explored the place many times in the summer—"

"If it were summer-time now, I wouldn't trouble to come and make an investigation," interrupted Handforth. "All sorts of people come and camp out in the hot weather. But this is practically winter-time, and no sane people would camp here. And look at that glow! It's too fiery—too red—to belong to an ordinary camp fire. Go easy, now, and don't do any more talking. We might be heard."

They crept on cautiously, Handforth leading the way. For once he was extra careful, and he pulled up abruptly as he found himself on the very edge of a sharp, jagged cliff. Trees and bushes grew right to the very edge, and then there was a sheer drop—right down into the gully, and that glow was coming from down there.

Filled with the utmost curiosity, Handforth and McClure went down on to their hands and knees, and crept forward, parting the bushes as they did so, and then, lying flat on their faces, they peered over the edge of the cliff. Down below, they could see the scene in the centre of the gully—they could see everything distinctly, for there were now no obstructions. They were permitted to have a full view, and their own presence was not suspected.

"Great Scott!" breathed McClure in amazement.

Handforth made no comment, but his eyes were glittering with excitement, and well they might, for the two juniors were gazing upon a scene which was strange enough in all conscience—considering that it was taking place within the confines of this peaceful old Sussex wood!



CHAPTER 17.

The Mystery of Bellton Wood!

SMALL wonder that Handforth and McClure were startled.

For there, down in the gully, were two figures. They were not the figures of poachers, or of vagrants, but they were figures dressed in long, flowing robes, and with curious head-dresses adorning them. One was sitting in front of a curious-looking furnace—a fireplace which had been apparently built from stones. The interior of it was glowing ruddily, as though the fire had been fed with some special kind of fuel, and for the first time the juniors became aware that the air was heavily charged with a pungent, scent-like smoke.

"It's incense!" murmured McClure, with a start.

"By George, so it is!" breathed Handforth. "Incense! I knew there was something funny about that niff! And look at those two chaps! Who the dickens are they, and what do they think they're doing?"

"Never saw anything like it!" said McClure.

It was impossible to see the faces of the strangers. The man in front of the furnace was swaying to and fro, and uttering a moaning incantation, while the other was capering about, evidently engaged in some peculiar sort of rite. Then, suddenly, the squatting figure turned his face upwards, and raised both his hands towards the sky.

Handforth caught his breath in with a sharp hiss.

"Don't you see?" he whispered. "It's old Zuma!"

"What?"

"Zuma the Mystic!"

"But you've never seen him!" said McClure, startled.

"I don't care about that—he's Zuma!" declared Handforth. "Didn't Church describe him to us? Didn't we hear about him from the girls? Look for yourself! How could he be anybody else?"

McClure caught his breath in, too.

"I believe you're right!" he muttered. "I forgot to ask you about Zuma. Didn't you find him in the village?"

"Of course not—he's gone—his tent, and everything!" said Handforth. "This explains it! He and his beastly assistant have

come here—into the wood! And now they're indulging in some of their heathen rites! I'm going to have a word with him!"

"Hold on!" gasped Mac. "Don't be in such a hurry!"

"I want to ask him what he's done to Church!" said Edward Oswald fiercely. "And if he doesn't answer me——"

"Do you expect him to answer?" growled McClure. "Even if he has done anything, do you think he'll admit it? Besides, it might be dangerous! If Zuma's done anything to Church, he might just as easily do something to you! But I don't believe it. It's all your silly imagination. Why should this old fortune-teller do any harm to Church? It isn't reasonable!"

But this was a consideration which had no effect upon Handforth. He never based his calculations upon reason.

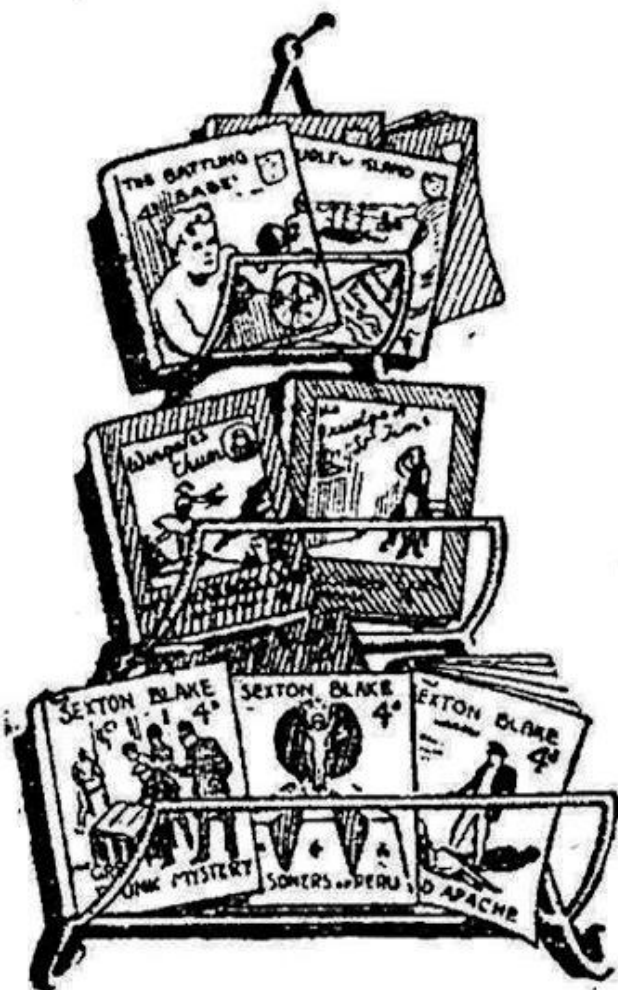
"I don't care anything about that," he said stubbornly. "Church went down to this heathen's tent yesterday, and ever since then he's been squiffy. And I'm going to ask Zuma what he did!"

"All right, if you're really determined——"

"I am!"

"Then we'd better creep round, through

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EVERYWHERE!

these trees," said McClure. "We can't get down here—it's too sheer. It'll take us a good long while to get round, because you can only get into the gully from the other end."

They rose to their feet, and cautiously retraced their steps for a short distance. Then they worked their way round, losing sight of the glow as a hillock rose, on their flank. But they knew their bearings. Even in the darkness of a winter's night they could find their way about Bellton Wood; there was hardly an inch of the wood that they did not know by heart.

Handforth was impatient and worried. He would have preferred to tumble over the edge of the cliff, even at the risk of injuring himself. It was a long way round to reach the entrance of the gully. But, of course, it was the only thing to be done. Handforth might have broken his neck if he had chosen the other course.

"Well, here we are!" said McClure at last. "It's strange, though. There's no glow now, and yet the gully is right in front of us!"

"They've gone!" said Handforth fiercely. "Oh, you chump! We ought to have jumped straight down——"

"But we couldn't have jumped down!" interrupted Mac. "It's a tremendous drop into that gully, and there are nothing but stones below!"

"Well, come on—let's make a rush for it!" interrupted Handforth.

They ran blindly into the gully, and McClure, at least, was aware of a thrill. Would those strange brown men spring out and attack them? For the first time, McClure realised that this adventure was rather risky. They didn't know the men, and they might object to being disturbed in the middle of their curious rites.

Neither of the juniors had any weapons, and, if it came to that, they had no lights with them, either. They didn't even possess a box of matches, and it was pitch dark in the wood.

"Hold on!" panted Mac at length. "We'd better go easy, Handy. Those men may be lurking somewhere——"

"Hi!" roared Handforth at the top of his voice. "Where are you?"

They had penetrated right into the gully by this time, and they judged that they were on the spot where that crude furnace had been burning. But now there was no sign left. There were no strange figures prancing about; there was no glow of orange-coloured fire. Even the smell of incense had gone out of the air. It seemed difficult to believe that they had seen anything at all, and yet they knew well enough that their eyes could not have played them so false.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, coming to a halt and breathing hard. "There's nobody here now! Are you sure this is the same gully?"

"Of course it is. There's only one."

"Well, I can't understand it," said Handforth blankly. "Where are they? Where's

the fire? They've simply vanished into thin air!"

"By Jupiter!" said Mac. "Come here, Handy—quick!"

Handforth felt his way to his chum's side. McClure was bending down and feeling the earth.

"It's warm!" said Handforth, as he, too, felt.

"It's absolutely hot here!" said McClure. "We were right, then; and this is the spot where the fire was burning. But there's no sign of it now, and there aren't even any stones or any ashes. I say, I don't like it, Handy! It's—it's uncanny!"

Handforth breathed hard.

"I don't know about being uncanny," he said, "but it's thundering mysterious!"

CHAPTER 18.

Baffled!



McCLURE looked about him rather apprehensively.

"I say!" he muttered. "We'd better be going!"

Now that the excitement was over for the moment, McClure was aware of a strange uneasiness. The very mystery of the brown men was enough to make him a bit nervous. He was plucky enough as a rule, but there was something so strange about all this—something that affected his very marrows. What could it mean?

Undoubtedly those figures belonged to Zuma the Mystic and his assistant. But why had they so completely disappeared? How had they received the alarm? And where were they now? It was impossible for them to be far off, for there hadn't been time for them to go any great distance. Perhaps they were lurking within a few yards, watching out of the darkness, ready to spring!

McClure glanced over his shoulder, and he crept a little nearer to Handforth.

"I don't like it!" he whispered. "There's something—something dreadful about it all!"

Even Handforth was beginning to feel uncertain and uneasy. There was something unknown here, something that neither he nor his companion could explain.

"Why did they clear off?" he muttered. "They must have spotted us, Mac. Perhaps they knew that we were looking down upon them, and as soon as we went away they hooked it. By George, it's—it's significant!"

"Significant of what?"

"I don't know—but it's significant, all the same!" declared Edward Oswald grimly. "Those two rotters aren't what they seem to be. Fortune-tellers, eh? I don't believe it! Ordinary fortune-tellers don't come to woods and hold secret rites in front of funny furnaces. I believe that old Zuma——"

"Better go easy, old man," urged Mac. "Perhaps they can hear all we're saying—"

"Yes, you may be right," whispered Handforth, glancing round. "I wish I had an electric torch, or even a box of matches. This darkness— What was that?"

McClure jumped about a foot into the air.

"What was what" he gasped.

"No need to get scared, you ass!" hissed Handforth. "I thought I heard something just then—a kind of swishing sound up the gully, near those bushes. Listen!"

They stood stock still, and McClure half expected Handforth to comment upon the beating of his heart. For it seemed to Mac that his heart was thumping so loudly that Handy could not fail to hear it.

"Yes, there's something there!" murmured the leader of Study D, after a short pause. "We'll make a quick rush!"

"Don't!" panted McClure. "They may have knives! You know what these brown men are! In two ticks they can murder you!"

If Handforth had hesitated, he might have taken heed of this warning, but he didn't hesitate. It wasn't his habit to do so. He dashed forward blindly, and the next moment he went crashing over, having tripped on an unseen boulder. He hit the ground with a terrific thud, and McClure caught his breath in.

Was it his fancy, or had he seen a flash of something just beyond, like the gleam of moonlight on a steel blade? He had certainly seen a flash of some kind, but it was gone now. There was a faint sound, almost intangible above the sighing of the wind in the tree-tops. And then a sudden gust came down, flurrying the branches and causing many eerie creaks amongst the trees.

"Are you hurt, Handy?" muttered McClure shakily, as he ventured forward.

"I don't know," came Handforth's reply. "I'm jolly dazed—I know that! I must have hit my head against a stone or something. By George, I'm all dizzy!"

"We'd better get out of here," said McClure in a shaky voice.

And even Handforth agreed. For once the great Edward Oswald's arrogance had gone. He had no further desire to search the wood. It was altogether too risky. They had no lights and no weapons. If they were suddenly attacked, they would have all the disadvantage.

There was no guarantee that they would be able to get out of the wood unmolested. If those two strange men knew of their presence, and resented the schoolboys' intrusion, there might be some grim work accomplished.

McClure was no coward, but an unnamable horror had gripped him now. The sighing of the wind in the trees overhead, the ghostly effect of the moonlight, the knowledge that two heathen forms were lurking near—all these things contributed. And Handforth began to catch the same sensation. His one desire was to get out, to find himself in the open lane.

"Come on, we've had enough of this!" he

said huskily. "I haven't got the wind up, but I'll admit I'm pretty worried."

McClure felt like giving way to panic, but he fought against this impulse. It would be a mad thing to go dashing through the trees, with the possibility of coming a cropper over some unseen root. Together the two juniors forced their way out of the gully, and they climbed the steep rocks and veered off towards the footpath. They found it at last and felt a little easier.

But they did not breathe freely till they had plunged right out of the wood and found themselves in the lane.

"Phew!" murmured McClure. "I'm glad to be here, Handy. There's—there's something horrid in that wood. What does it mean? What were the rotters doing there? And who were they?"

"Zuma and his assistant!" replied Handforth.

"I know that—but why?" asked Mac. "Why should they be there, performing their beastly rites? Burning incense and lighting fires in stone furnaces. It's all so—so mysterious!"

Handforth had now regained full control of himself.

"We haven't finished yet!" he said darkly. "We won't do any more investigating to-night, but we'll come again to-morrow. We'll have a look at this wood in full light, and we'll get on the track."

"I don't mind coming here by daylight so much," said McClure. "But no more night jaunts. Too jolly risky. I'm no funk, but I'm human. I feel all shaky!"

"Well, let's get back to the school!" said Handforth. "We've got to see about Church—it's nearly bedtime, too."

"Shall we tell any of the others about this?"

"Why not?" said Handforth. "Of course we'll tell them, and we'll get a whole crowd of chaps down here to-morrow and we'll go through the wood thoroughly. By George! We'll round up those two niggers!"

They went on towards the school, thinking deeply over their recent experience. It had come so unexpectedly, like everything else during these last twenty-four hours.

What could be the meaning of it all?

And Church—poor old Church! What about him? Handforth's anxiety for his chum came back in full force, and before he got to the school he was running. Over half an hour had elapsed, and perhaps Church was queer again. It would be better to report everything to Mr. Nelson Lee at once, so that he could take charge. And this decision on Handforth's part proved very conclusively how concerned he was. For as a general rule he professed to be capable of dealing with any situation personally.

But for once Edward Oswald Handforth felt that he was out of his depth.



CHAPTER 19.

A Bit Too Tall!



W

HEN Handforth and McClure hurried into the Ancient House, they came upon Fullwood and De Valerie, and two or three other

Remove fellows in the lobby.

"Where on earth have you been to?" asked Fullwood, looking at the pair curiously. "You're all muddy and dirty and——"

"Never mind our appearance!" said Handforth. "How's Church?"

"Oh, bother Church!" said De Valerie. "He's all right!"

"You're lucky to get in without being stopped by anybody," said Fullwood. "You've been breaking bounds, my lads——"

"What does it matter whether we've been breaking bounds or not?" interrupted Handforth. "How's Church? Has anything else happened to him? Is he all right?"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Russell. "We looked into Study D only five minutes ago, and Church is having a nap in the chair. There's nothing wrong with him at all—only a bit seedy. He'll be all right to-morrow."

"Are you sure he was only asleep?" asked McClure anxiously.

"What do you mean—sure he was only asleep?"

"He wasn't in a fit or anything?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Without warning Church's legs seemed to sag; he swayed backwards and then, unable to check himself, fell down the whole flight of stairs, landing at the bottom with a sickening crash!

The group of juniors laughed uproariously.

"You fellows make me tired!" grinned Fullwood. "I'll sympathise with anybody when he's really ill, but Church is only just a bit out of sorts. You've made him ten times as bad by your silly pandering. He's probably thinking about that old fortune-teller, too. It's got on his mind; it's an obsession with him. I always thought that Church was stronger willed."

"You don't understand!" said Handforth fiercely. "You—you callous rotters! You disbelieving bounders! You don't realise what's been happening!"

"We realise that you shoved a lot of beastly patent medicines down Church's throat, and it's easy enough to understand why he's seedy!" grinned Russell. "Poor chap, it's a wonder he's not beyond human aid."

Handforth regarded them all with a set, stern face.

"All right, you'll see!" he said curtly. "You'll be sorry for this later on. I tell you there's something extraordinary going on. There's some mystery here, some dreadful work afoot. Do you know what happened to Mac and me just now—down by the wood?"

"Did you see a ghost?" asked De Valerie.
 "No; we saw a flickering light in the wood," said Handforth. "We went and investigated, and saw old Zuma and that other fellow with him. They were down in the gully, holding some sort of secret rite, in front of a furnace."

"And incense was burning," said McClure. "I tell you it was pretty eerie."

The other juniors looked at them rather dubiously.

"And do you expect us to believe this?" inquired Fullwood.

"It's true!" said Handforth. "You—you silly idiots! Do you think we'd come here with a spoof yarn? We went down into the gully, and when we got there we found nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Those men had gone," said McClure. "But I believe they were still lurking about, because we heard all sorts of mysterious sounds—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other juniors yelled with appreciation of this joke.

"Cheese it, Handy!" said De Valerie. "My dear, deluded old chap. You surely don't think that we're going to swallow a story like this?"

"I guess not!" said Russell. "Flickering fires in Bellton Wood. Incense burning. What rot!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

By this time a crowd of other fellows had come along, and they had heard the latter part of the story. They were equally amused. Nobody would believe the yarn, and even McClure was beginning to doubt it now. It seemed so unreal—so fantastic. Was it possible that he and Handforth had imagined— But no! It couldn't be. It sounded queer, but it was a fact.

"We're awfully sorry, Handy, but we can't sympathise," grinned Harry Gresham. "We know you too well, old man!"

"What do you mean—you know me?"

"Well, you've got a little habit of exaggerating," smiled Fullwood. "I expect you saw a fire, built by some tramps, perhaps. And when they heard you coming they got the wind up and thought it was the police, or something. Perhaps they'd been pinching chickens from the village. So they stamped their fire out and bunked."

"That's about the size of it," said Somerton nodding. "Anyhow, you can't kid us with a story like that, Handy!"

"Rather not!"

Handforth set his teeth.

"All right—believe what you like!" he said darkly. "Come on, Mac! I'm fed-up with these cackling hyenas!"

"And so am I!" said McClure gruffly.

They pushed past, and another yell of laughter went up. And as they turned into the junior passage Handforth exploded.

"The rotters!" he said fiercely. "They won't believe anything—they won't even

believe that poor old Church is really ill! They'd go on just the same, even if he was dying!"

"Oh, I don't believe that!" said Mac. "They simply don't realise, that's all. I wonder if he's all right?"

They arrived at Study D, and strode in.

Church was sitting in the easy-chair, lying back with his eyes wide open, staring at the fire. His face was pale, and his lips were drawn. He looked very queer indeed—with an unnatural tightness about his cheeks. His skin seemed to be drawn in some peculiar way.

"Church, old man!" said Handforth, running forward. "How do you feel?"

NEXT WEDNESDAY!



Church made no reply.

"He's gone off again!" whispered Mac. "Oh, my goodness!"

But Church stirred, and turned his gaze upon his chums.

"I'm all right!" he muttered. "No, I haven't gone, Mac. I'm just lazy, that's all—I feel sort of numb. It's come on again, you know—but worse than before. I don't know what's the matter with me!" he added in despair. "I—I'm scared!"

It was the first admission he had made, and his chums were impressed.

"What are you scared of, old son?" asked

Handforth gently. "You mustn't worry—there's nothing seriously wrong. We'll tell Mr. Lee about it, and he'll bring the doctor, and——"

"No, no!" interrupted Church. "Please don't tell Mr. Lee—please don't!"

"Why not?"

"Because it may be nothing—because I don't seem to be ill in the ordinary way," replied Church desperately. "I don't want to be a laughing-stock. The fellows are grinning already—they think I'm only spoofing. There's no need to tell Mr. Lee. Just take me up to bed, you chaps. That's all I want. Take me up to bed! I want to lie down."

There was something rather pitiful in

"THE DOOMED SCHOOLBOY!"

The death of Walter Church!

St. Frank's, when it first learns the dread news, is stunned, dumbfounded. It seems so impossible; only a day or two ago Church was as hale and as hearty as anybody. But no. Dr. Brett himself has issued the verdict—Church is dead!

Poor Handy and McClure. As his especial chums they feel it more than anybody. But Handy declares it is impossible—he says he feels that Church can't be dead. Even after he sees the apparently lifeless body he is still unconvinced. Is he right? Is Church really dead?

This amazing yarn—the second of the series—will grip you from beginning to end. Be sure not to miss it.

"PRIDE O' THE CIRCUS!"

The concluding instalment of Willy Handforth's tale of circus-life thrills.

ORDER IN ADVANCE!

Church's entreaty. His voice was dull and dreary, and he seemed to have lost all hope. For a moment Handforth hesitated. He felt inclined to ignore his chum's request, and to fetch Nelson Lee at once.

"Please!" said Church, as though he was reading Handforth's mind.

"Oh, all right!" said Edward Oswald. "But if you're no better in the morning, my lad, I shall go straight to the doctor! Come on, Mac—lend a hand! We'll carry him upstairs."

"No, you won't!" said Church, with a start. "I'm not going to be carried—and have everybody jeering at me! I'll walk upstairs alone—and I'll pretend that I'm all right."

Perhaps I am all right," he added wonderingly. "I don't know—everything seems to be so upside down!"

And then a surprised look came into his face. He tried to get out of the chair—but couldn't!



CHAPTER 20.

The Stricken Schoolboy!

HURCH looked at his chums with a light of terror in his eyes.

"I—I can't get up!" he said desperately.

"Why can't you?"

asked Handforth. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know—but my legs are all stiff!" said Church, in a frightened voice. "I can't move! I—I seem to be paralysed! Oh, what's the matter? What's come over me? I've never been like this before! Handy! Mac! I tell you I can't move!"

They stared at him, aghast. It was pitiful to see him sitting there, straining to rise to his feet, and failing. And Church was such a strong chap, too—such a robust, energetic fellow.

"Mac, rush off for Mr. Lee!" said Handforth. "I'm not going to put up with this any longer! He's ill—he's seized, or something!"

"What do you think I am—the engine of your Austin Seven?" asked Church, with a plucky attempt at sarcasm.

"I mean, you've had a seizure!" said Handforth. "It's a stroke, or something—an epileptic fit!"

"I suppose you mean an epileptic fit?" asked McClure.

"Don't quibble!" shouted Handforth. "My only hat! Are you going to start quibbling with poor old Church paralysed before our eyes? Go and fetch Mr. Lee!"

"No, don't!" urged Church. "I shall be better in a minute—it's only a kind of stiffness. If Mr. Lee comes here and finds me like this, he'll bung me straight into the sanny. Then I may not get out for a week! And what about footer? And there's a paper chase the day after to-morrow, too! I'm one of the hares, Handy! Don't bring Mr. Lee here, or I shall be dished!"

"But—but——"

"He seems to be better!" put in McClure. "Come along, old man! That's the way!"

They both hoisted Church out of his chair, and after a few minutes he seemed to be more like himself. He was soon walking round the room, and now he was smiling bravely.

"It was only a sort of numbness," he said. "My legs seemed to go all dead, you know. I couldn't even feel them—I didn't know they were there!"

"My goodness!"

"I'm wondering if that medicine you gave me was all right," went on Church. "It's all very well to laugh, Handy, but you *did* give me a lot, didn't you? And there were all sorts of stuffs mixed up, too."

"I wonder if you overdid it, Handy?" asked McClure, staring. "Perhaps that's the reason for all this?"

Handforth grunted.

"Don't be an ass!" he said. "Didn't Church collapse on the playing-fields? And he hadn't had a drop of medicine of any kind then."

"Yes, but all that medicine may have made him worse," argued McClure. "Anyhow, perhaps a night's sleep will help him to work it off."

"Yes, that's what I want—sleep," said Church wearily. "It's almost too much trouble for me to move a hand. I feel so heavy and listless."

"That's the funny part of it," said McClure. "Not long ago you were leaping about and turning cartwheels!"

"I know," said Church miserably. "Why did I come over so crazy? I don't seem to remember it very well. I went outside, didn't I, and took some fresh air? And then I seemed to recover all of a sudden——"

"Yes, and you said that the lights in the common-room went red and green."

"So they did!" declared Church. "These lights in here have gone red and green, too—but they seem all right now."

"You're a queer kind of case, old man," said Handforth. "You can't feel any pain, and you haven't any fever, and yet you're acting so strangely. It beats me hollow!"

"Oh, I suppose I'm making a fuss over nothing," said Church. "If we only understood what it was it would be different. It's because I've never had anything like it before, I expect. I shall be all right, you chaps. Thanks awfully for what you're doing. You're looking after me like a couple of good 'uns!"

"Don't be an ass!" said Handforth curtly. "We're your chums, aren't we?"

Church made a great show of being himself again. He spoke about the football, and asked all sorts of inconsequential questions. Neither Handforth nor McClure knew what this effort was costing him.

For Church knew that he was very far from right.

There was a pain in his left side, and every now and again it seemed to him that his heart was about to stop beating. It was pure fancy, of course, but he could almost have sworn that his heart was acting erratically. And at times a huge black blur came over his vision so that he couldn't see anything ahead of him. His chums became blotted out—the study vanished—and nothing but a black void was there. Then, in a flash it would clear, and he would come back, as it were. But he said nothing of this. There was no reason to worry his chums any more.

"Well, let's get upstairs before the bell

goes," he said carelessly. "We don't want to go up in the crush. It's nearly time for bell, isn't it?"

"Yes, nearly!" said Handforth. "I'm jolly glad, old man, that you're feeling better. You don't look up to the mark by any means—but a good sleep may make all the difference."

"Of course it will," laughed Church. "I expect I shall be all serene to-morrow."

But something within him told him that his words were hollow. The morrow? It seemed a long way off—a very, very long way.

And there was something else which was troubling Church, too.

It was something which he dared not tell Handforth or McClure. It was something which brought that expression of utter despair into his eyes more acutely than ever. He had thought of his Uncle Geoffrey! And he had remembered that Uncle Geoffrey had died suddenly—after two or three days of a strange, unaccountable illness.

Church did not know all the details—for he had never been very intimate with Uncle Geoff. But he knew that the unfortunate gentleman had languished without any apparent cause. He had been seized by a curious kind of paralytic stroke—although, just before the seizure, he had been in robust health. Was there something in the blood? Was Church himself about to be affected in the same way? It was too horrible—too awful to think about. He tried to thrust it out of his mind—he told himself that he was getting morbid. It was nonsense—sheer, unadulterated nonsense! In all probability his complaint was something quite simple—something which the doctor could put right in less than half-an-hour.

Yet he didn't want to see the doctor!

Why not? Perhaps Church was afraid—perhaps he felt that if he saw the doctor he would be undeceived! And at the back of his mind he kept on thinking about Zuma the Mystic. Zuma had referred to Uncle Geoff. And Zuma had said that everything was blank in Church's future! Of course, he was only a fortune-teller—and it was sheer idiocy to believe in the vapourings of such a charlatan!

And yet——



CHAPTER 21.

The Fall

"COME on!" said Handforth briskly.

Church started.

"Yes, we'd better go!" he muttered.

"I was just thinking about Zuma. I—I mean——"

"Oh, so you've been thinking about that beggar, too?" asked Handforth quickly. "Do

you believe that Zuma is responsible for your illness, Church?"

"How can he be?" asked Church. "Besides that, I'm not ill! At least, I'm not ill in the usual way. That's the whole trouble—I don't know what's wrong. Oh, why talk about it? Let me get to bed!"

They went out, and Church's walk was rather unsteady. His chums remained close to him, in case he should need their assistance.

But he seemed quite all right. By the time they reached the lobby he was chatting about the paper chase, and the chances of the hounds catching the hares.

Some of the Remove fellows were standing there—Gulliver and Bell and Hubbard and Long.

"Hallo!" said Gulliver, with a grin. "Here comes the poor stricken patient!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You dry up, Albert Gulliver!" said Handforth threateningly. "Do you want me to punch your beastly nose?"

Gulliver scowled.

"Don't be an ass, Handy," he said. "You know jolly well that Church is only spoofing!"

"That's all!" said Church lightly. "There's nothing really the matter with me."

"There you are—he admits it!" said Bell, with a sneer. "He ought to be boiled for pretending like this. I expect he wants to get into the sanny—so that he can have a week of ease, without any lessons!"

"That's about the size of it," said Gulliver mockingly.

The two cads of Study A drew hastily aside as Handforth came past. Since Bernard Forrest had been expelled, Gulliver and Bell had been very subdued and quiet. They were leaderless now, and were practically harmless.

"If it wasn't too much trouble I'd knock the pair of you down," said Handforth contemptuously. "You may be blind, but I'm not!"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Gulliver.

"Well, look at him!" said Handforth, pointing dramatically at Church. "Look at his face! Do you call him well? Look at his pale cheeks, and his drawn lips! He's a mere ghost to what he was yesterday!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's a fine way to cheer the patient up—to tell him to his face that he looks like a ghost!" jeered Teddy Long. "You'll be asking him next if he wants any flowers at his funeral!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you rotters!" roared Handforth. "I'll jolly well knock you down now!"

He made a rush at them, but they bolted upstairs like so many rabbits. And they paused on the top landing, looking down, grinning, and making all sorts of sneering remarks regarding Church's health.

Unhappily, they were not the only ones. Even the ordinary decent fellows were joining in the laughter. Nobody believed that Church was really unwell. In fact, it was generally agreed, now, that his indisposition was entirely due to Handforth's treatment of him.

"You've been giving him too many pills, and too many spoonfuls of medicine, Handy," said De Valerie. "That's all that's the matter with him. It's a good thing Nipper pinched all those bottles—or you'd have killed him by this time!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Poor Church was feeling very self-conscious—very unhappy. He was almost at the top of the stairs by now, and McClure was sticking close to him. For Mac had noticed that Church had swayed once or twice—although he strove hard not to reveal his unsteadiness. Truth to tell, Church was frightened—badly frightened. Going upstairs, he had come over dreadfully numb again, and everything had gone black more than once. He felt that he was groping. And that pain in his left side was worse—so much worse that it was only with great difficulty that he kept a straight face. His breath came and went in short gasps, but amidst all the laughter and jeering nobody noticed it.

"I think we ought to get up a vote of censure against Handforth!" Gulliver was saying. "He's cold-hearted! Fancy allowing the patient to walk upstairs to bed! He ought to have brought a stretcher!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He half kills the poor chap with his beastly patent medicines, and then he—Hi!" gasped Gulliver. "Look out, you ass! What the dickens—"

"You—you sneering outsider!" roared Handforth, leaping forward. "I'll close your mouth for you! Can't you see that Church is really ill? Why can't you all stop jeering like this? And as for you, Gulliver—"

"Look out!" came a shout from McClure. "Church, old man! What the—"

For a moment, McClure had taken his gaze off Church, and they were just at the top of the stairs. And during that second Church seemed to lose his footing. He swayed backwards—and made utterly no effort to save himself. Indeed, he seemed to crumple up. His legs sagged, and he fell—backwards.

"Oh!"

Thud-thud-thud-crash!

Nobody was on the stairs behind Church, and he fell backwards, and then went down the whole flight of stairs in a dreadful, crashing fall. There was something awful in the way he went down—without making the slightest effort to save himself. It was as though he had suddenly fainted.

And now there was a silence—a dread silence that was so intense that a pin might be heard to fall. And there lay Church in the lobby below—crumpled up, a grotesque

heap of humanity. He was still—deathly, horribly still.

"Oh, my goodness!" said De Valerie, breaking that awful silence.

Handforth had twirled round, and he was gazing downstairs with wild eyes. His face was pale, and he uttered a hoarse cry of anguish.

"Do you believe now?" he asked bitterly. "You cads—you rotters! Do you believe that poor old Church—"

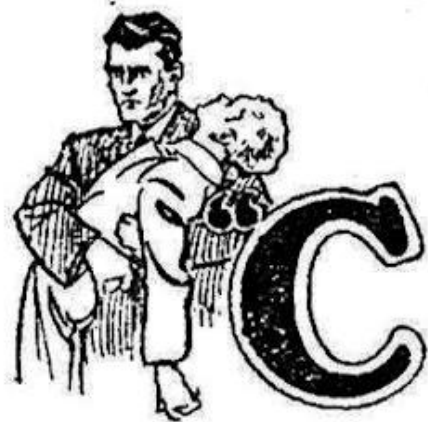
"Don't, Handy—don't!" urged Mac. "He may be dead! I believe he's broken his neck!"

They ran down the stairs recklessly, and at the same moment several other juniors came crowding into the lobby, attracted by the sound of Church's fall.

Handforth dropped on his knees, and McClure did the same. They gently lifted Church up, and gazed into his pale, drawn face.

"Church, old man!" said Handforth softly, with a catch in his voice.

But no reply came from that limp form in his arms!



CHAPTER 22.

Nelson Lee Takes Charge!

"CHURCH, old man—Church!" panted Handforth desperately.

"Oh, he's dead!" sobbed McClure.

"He's not—he can't be!" said Handforth fiercely. "Church—why don't you speak? Are you hurt, old chap?"

"Feel his heart!" said De Valerie, in a shaky, quavering voice.

The juniors were crowding round, and there was no laughter now. Every voice had been stilled, and a great hush had come. Those who had seen the fall were startled by it. More than one junior had fallen headlong down the stairs, but never had there been such a fall as this.

"Somebody had better fetch the doctor!" shouted Fullwood. "Quick! Rush off for Dr. Brett—and bring Mr. Lee, too!"

"I'll go!" said Tommy Watson. "I'll fetch Mr. Lee first!"

He was off like the wind, and he met Nipper in the corridor.

"Quick—go and have a look at old Church!" panted Tommy. "He just fell downstairs, and I believe he's half killed himself!"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Nipper. "You'd better bring the gov'nor!"

"I'm just going for him!" said Watson, speeding on.

Nipper hurried into the lobby, and pushed his way through the pressing crowd.

"Be careful, you chaps!" he said earnestly. "Don't press round like this—give

the chap some air! How is he, Handy? Any bones broken?"

"I don't know—I haven't felt!" said Handforth hoarsely. "He's breathing, though—breathing heavily, too! Thank heaven for that! For half a tick I thought that he was dead!"

There came a sudden commotion from the end of the lobby, and the next moment Nelson Lee appeared, Tommy Watson having found him just at the end of the corridor. All the voices were stilled as the House-master-detective came striding up.

"Stand aside, boys!" said Nelson Lee. "I understand that Church has fallen downstairs, and has hurt himself. Let me see him!"

A great crowd had collected by this time, but everybody moved aside as Nelson Lee came through. He knelt by Church, and then he suddenly caught his breath in.

"Why, good gracious, what on earth is the matter with the boy?" he asked sharply.

"He fell downstairs, sir!" said a dozen voices.

"Yes, I know—but— Wait—wait!" said Nelson Lee. "Handforth, move aside!"

"He's ill, sir. He was ill even before he fell—" began Handforth.

"Let me see him!" said Lee grimly.

He made a quick examination, and a startled expression had come into his face. He lifted Church's eyelids, and closely examined the pupils. Then he felt his pulse, and laid a hand over his heart. It was only a brief examination, but it was sufficient to make Nelson Lee reveal an anxiety that was very unusual in him.

"How long has this boy been unwell?" he asked sharply, looking at Handforth.

"All day, sir, on and off."

"Then why did not somebody report him?" demanded Nelson Lee angrily. "Why has not Church's condition been reported to Dr. Brett or to me?"

"We thought he was all right, sir, in the main," replied Handforth miserably. "He said he didn't want to see you, and he begged us not to report him, because it would mean going into the sanary!"

"As it happens, he is going into the sanatorium at once!" said Nelson Lee. "He ought to have been there hours ago."

"Is he badly hurt, sir?" asked McClure.

"Hurt—no!" replied Lee. "The fall has only caused one or two bruises. He fell limply, and he escaped quite lightly."

"Then it isn't the fall you're worried about, gov'nor?" asked Nipper sharply.

"No, of course not," replied Lee. "A fall downstairs doesn't do much damage to a junior schoolboy! Stand aside, all of you! I am very angry with you all—one of you should have told me about Church's condition. He should have been under treatment long ago."

Without another word, Nelson Lee lifted Church in his arms, and pushed through the excited crowd. He went towards his own study, and Handforth and McClure were the

only juniors who followed him—with the exception of Nipper.

"Won't you tell us what his illness is, sir?" asked Handforth pleadingly.

"I don't know, Handforth—I cannot tell you what is the matter with him," replied Nelson Lee, as he strode along. "Don't bother now—"

"I'm not bothering, sir!" urged Handforth. "But he's my chum—"

"Yes, I understand," said Lee. "I'm sorry, my boy. I can only tell you that Church is in a very serious condition. His heart is weak—feeble and erratic. It is amazing, because Church has always been so healthy."

"I knew it was something serious all the time!" said Handforth miserably. "Oh, why didn't I come to you at first, sir? But old Church kept begging me not to tell you. He thought it was only a trifle."

"Then let this be a lesson to you for next time, Handforth," said Nelson Lee. "You mustn't follow me now.

I must take Church to my own study, and then have him conveyed to the sanatorium. But first of all Dr. Brett must make an examination. I cannot allow you to be there, Handforth. You must wait."

And a minute later Nelson Lee carried Church into his own study, and the door closed. Dr. Brett came and passed inside. Handforth and McClure hung about in the corridor—till a couple of prefects came along and cleared everybody away. For by this time other juniors had collected round. Everybody was curious and excited.

"I'll bet it's all a storm in a teacup," said Hubbard. "He simply fell downstairs and fainted, that's all. It's enough to make anybody's heart go erratic. He'll be all right again in a day or two."

"Of course he will!"

Even now the majority of the juniors were not taking a serious view of the case. And although all sorts of comments were passed to and fro, Handforth took no notice of them. He and McClure stood aside—waiting. They hardly heard the talk that went on round them. They felt guilty. Why hadn't they reported Church earlier? Now that it was too late, they could see that they should have taken no notice of their chum's pleadings. He had obviously been very ill all along, and they should have told Nelson Lee about it. And now he was in a grave condition, although nobody else would believe it.

At last Nelson Lee came out of the

corridor again, and, as before, he was carrying Church. This time Church was wrapped in a travelling rug, and Dr. Brett was walking beside the Housemaster. The doctor was looking grave and serious.

"What's the matter with him, doctor?" asked a dozen voices. "Is he really bad?"

"Don't bother, boys—I can't tell you!" replied Dr. Brett. "It may be serious—or it may not. We can't tell yet. The whole affair is very mysterious."

Handforth ran up, and clung to Dr. Brett's arm.

"But will he be all right, doctor?" he asked huskily.

"I hope so!" said Dr. Brett, in a queer tone. "I hope so, Handforth!"

And they went outside—bound for the school sanatorium. Handforth's mind was in a whirl. Dr. Brett had said that he hoped so. What did it mean? Was Church so very ill that even the doctor couldn't give a definite answer?

LISTEN, BROTHERS!

Doubtless you will all be pleased, nay, over-joyed, to learn that I, the great William Napoleon Browne, have been engaged to write the next serial.

"JOKER JONES' LEGACY!"

is the title of my superb yarn, and it will appear immediately after Brother Willy's effort has ended. So don't forget, I implore you!

COMING SHORTLY!

CHAPTER 23.

The Prophecy!

CLANG-CLANG!
It was the bell, summoning all the Removites to go up to bed. But Edward Oswald Handforth and McClure were out in the Triangle, walking about aimlessly. They had seen Church vanish through Big Arch, en route for the sanatorium, but they had not been allowed to accompany him.

"Aren't you fellows coming in?" asked Nipper, as he emerged from the Ancient House

and saw them.

"No!" replied Handforth. "We don't want to come in yet. We want to hear about poor old Church."

"But, my dear chap, you can't," said Nipper. "He's ill, and that's all you'll know to-night. He'll be all right in the sanny—they'll look after him properly there. I'm afraid we've all been rather careless. I was a chump not to have seen Church's illness with my own eyes. But I never dreamed he was so bad."

"We're all to blame," said Handforth bitterly. "And I'm to blame more than anybody else. Oh, what a fool I was—what a mad idiot! And now it may be too late!"

Nipper shook his head.

"There's no need for you to get the wind up, Handy," he said quietly. "Fortunately, the actual fall didn't do him much harm. I imagined he must have fainted at the top of the stairs, and he fell down in a limp heap.

And as the fall didn't hurt him much, he'll soon recover."

"But Mr. Lee said his heart is weak and erratic, and that his condition is altogether mysterious," said McClure.

"Well, there's nothing much in that," said Nipper soothingly. "They'll soon find out what's wrong with him, and a few days in the sanny will put things right. You mustn't be scared. Come indoors, and go to bed. You'll hear nothing further to-night."

"All right—we'll come in soon!" said Handforth. "Perhaps we'll see somebody—and perhaps we can get some news. Don't worry, Nipper—we'll come in."

Nipper understood, and he discreetly went indoors. He thought it was rather fine, in fact, for Handforth and McClure to be so agitated. It proved their devotion to their stricken chum.

"We can't go to bed without knowing something!" muttered Handforth, as he turned towards Big Arch again. "Supposing we go along to the sanny, and ask—"

"It's no good, old son," interrupted Mac. "Nipper's right—we ought to go to bed. Old Church is safe enough now—he's in the sanny, and in good hands."

"Yes, but what's the matter with him?" asked Handforth. "Why can't they tell us what his illness is?"

"Perhaps they don't know," said McClure. "Didn't you notice how worried Mr. Lee was? And didn't you notice how puzzled old Brett was looking? I believe there's something unusual about—"

McClure broke off, and caught his breath in sharply.

"What's the matter?" asked Handforth.

"The prophecy!"

"Eh?"

"The prophecy of the old fortune-teller!" said McClure, in a startled voice. "Don't you remember what Zuma said?"

"What the dickens—"

"Church told us, didn't he?" went on McClure. "First, old Zuma saw him in the crystal—playing a game of football! Then he saw him having a fall—downstairs! The prophecy has come true!"

Church's two chums looked at one another with startled eyes.

"And—after the fall?" asked Handforth, in a scared voice.

"Nothing," said McClure. "That's what the old seer said—after the fall a blank! And what does a blank mean, Handy? Oh, my hat! Do you think poor old Church is going to—to peg out?"

Handforth gave a kind of gulp.

"It's impossible!" he said, in a fierce voice. "Confound Zuma! I don't believe a word of it! It's just coincidence—that's all! I tell you it's coincidence!"

But he was so vehement—so fierce—that his words did not carry conviction. Did he really believe that the fulfilling of the prophecy was a mere coincidence?

What could it all mean? There was something dreadfully mysterious about the whole succession of events—something sinister.

Handforth and McClure would have thought so, in all truth, if they could have seen two figures that were lurking close behind the hedge in Inner Court—within full sight of the sanatorium. Those figures had been there for some time. They had seen Church carried along in the moonlight, and they had seen him taken into the sanny. They had even watched while a light came up in one of the private wards.

And after a while one of the two figures spoke. He did not use English, but a strange, unusual kind of tongue.

"Two messages has the accursed boy received!" said Zuma the Mystic. "Messages that have penetrated his skin—messages of slow death!"

The other figure nodded in agreement.

"Good words, my master!" he said softly. "And who can know that these messages are tiny fragments of wood? Tiny splinters?"

"Our methods are always sure!" said Zuma unemotionally. "When the third message is delivered—then will it mean death itself! And the third shall follow, as surely as the sun will rise at the dawn of another day!"

They turned aside, and vanished into the night.

Within the sanatorium, poor Church was put into bed, and consternation reigned between Dr. Brett, Nelson Lee, and the headmaster. What was the matter with this boy? What was this strange malady, which had struck him down?

For, truth to tell, the doctor himself could arrive at no conclusion. He was mystified. Church's condition left him absolutely bewildered.

And Handforth and McClure went to bed at last—led in by a prefect. And it was long before they slept that night. They were uncertain—they were filled with a great and terrible fear.

And, in all truth, they had reason to be fearful!

• THE END.

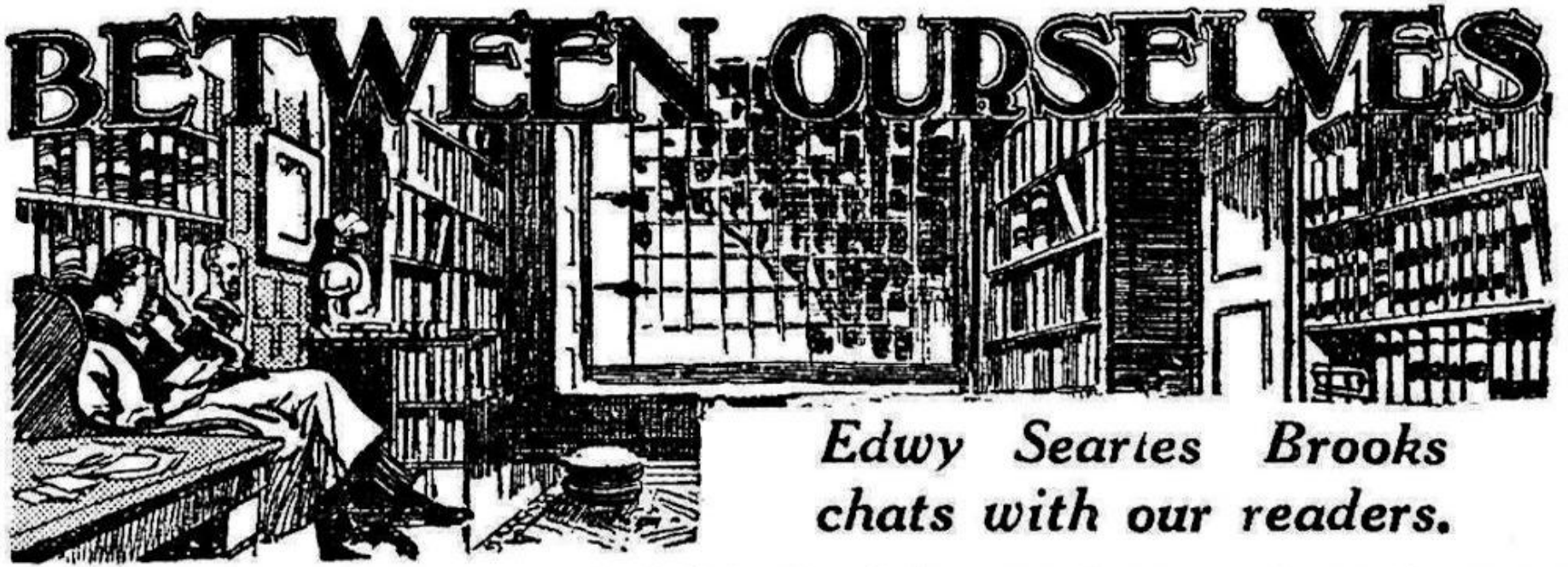
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Edwy Searles Brooks
chats with our readers.

NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed: EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, LONDON, E.C.4. Every letter will have my personal attention. Letters of very special merit will be distinguished by a star (*) against the sender's name. My photo exchange offer is still open: my autographed photo for yours—but yours first, please.—E.S.B.

JUST a word to everybody in general before I get down to the week's replies. Now, look here, let's have a real understanding.

* * *

Lots of you are continually writing to me about all sorts of matters which don't concern me at all. For instance, why the "Monster Library" has been discontinued; when are we going to have a "St. Frank's Annual"; when the sectional map of St. Frank's will appear, and other things, too numerous to mention, of a similar nature. Well, although these inquiries are all very interesting to me, I've got to point out that I can't possibly give you any replies on such subjects. For, you see, they are purely editorial matters, and the only advice I can give you, is to write to the Editor himself.

* * *

In just the same way, I'm always getting letters about the St. Frank's League. But, dash it, you know, I'm only the author of the stories! I'm not the Editor, neither am I the Chief Officer. And because you write to me on subjects which should really be dealt with by the Editor or the Chief Officer, I expect you are calling me every name under the sun because I haven't replied to you, or because I haven't mentioned your affairs in these columns. You see, it means all sorts of delay—and annoyance. Not annoyance to me, mind you, but annoyance to yourselves. So I want you to do the right thing in the right way. Anything about the League, no matter what it is, directly concerns the Chief Officer. Anything about the Old Paper, whether it concerns the stories, or the illustrations, or the advertisements, directly concerns the Editor. So don't forget next time, will you?

* * *

You'll probably be saying that there's nothing left to write to me about, eh? Don't you believe it! I'm always delighted to get your letters, and I can answer them, too, if

you'll only deal with subjects that concern my stories. Savvy? Praise me when I deserve it if you like, and slang me if I've made a bloomer somewhere, or if I'm getting "dry" in my yarns, or if I'm forgetting favourite characters who ought to be to the fore. *They're* the subjects to write to me about. And if some of you give me a good old slanging, provided you've got a good cause for it, I shall be pleased.

* * *

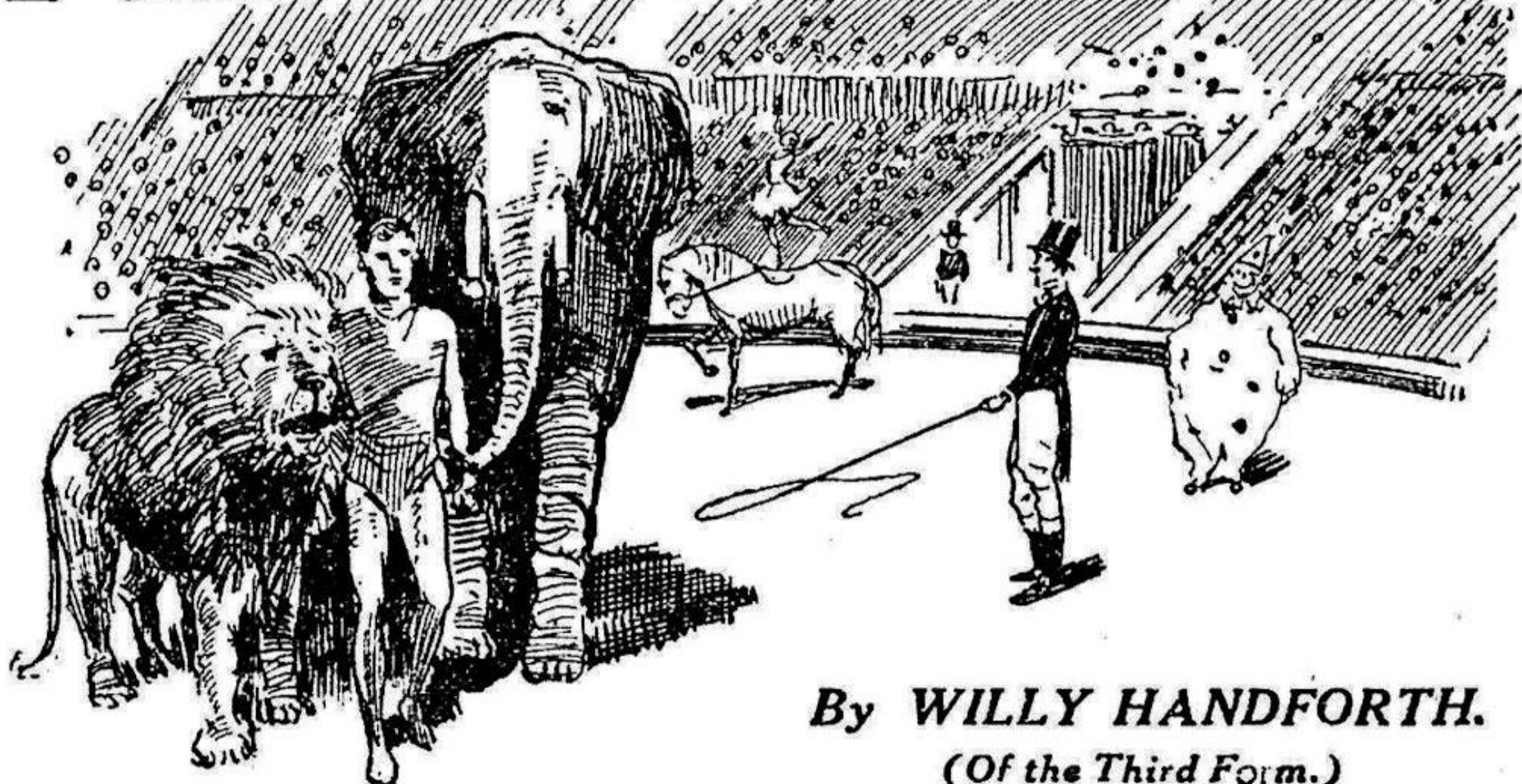
Just one second. "Appreciative" (Brixton) has sent me his photograph. But how the dickens does he think I can send him mine in exchange when he hasn't given me his address? So I shall appreciate it, "Appreciative," if you'll send that address along! And don't slang me for the delay, my lad!

* * *

I am going to quote a portion of a letter I have received from J. Marshall, of Stamford Hill, London, as it deals with the subject of the Moor View girls. I could comment on quite a lot of letters on this subject, but your one puts it best, I think, J. Marshall. It is a good answer to the "girl-haters." I might as well mention here that there is a vast and overwhelming majority in favour of the Moor View girls remaining in my stories. Well, here's the extract: "I am writing this to tick off those chaps who do not like the Moor View girls. If you did what that few want you to do, you would offend a hundred times as many other readers. 'R. P.' thinks the girls are featured too much, but if he troubles to work it out, he will find the boys *much* more to the fore. As for them 'not being wanted at all,' that is all *bosh*. You do not spoil your stories in the least by bringing the girls in. Quite the contrary. As for 'Sarcastic,' he either does not know what he is talking about, or else he is trying to be funny."

(Continued on page 41.)

PRIDE O' THE CIRCUS!



By **WILLY HANDFORTH.**
(Of the Third Form.)

This thrilling story of circus life has been written by Willy Handforth. It is exactly as he wrote it, save that small errors in punctuation and spelling have been corrected by the Editor.

READ THIS PARAGRAPH FIRST.

Tom Hamilton, a boy who has a remarkable influence over all animals, runs away from his cruel stepfather, and joins Boggannini's Gigantic Circus. He proves such a great success that Sam Boggs, the proprietor of the circus, promises Tom that he will make him the Star of the Show. Silas Snoops, the lion-tamer, overhears this and, mad with

jealousy, vows to put Tom out of the way. His opportunity occurs later when the lad goes into his caravan. The vehicle is resting upon a slope and, after locking Tom inside, Snoops gives the caravan a push and sends it hurtling down towards the deep and flooded river below!

NOW READ ON.

Our Hero Faces Doom!

TOM'S heart beat wildly as he felt the caravan gathering speed.

For in that second he knew that he was in deadly danger. He knew, too, that Silas Snoops was the cause of it. Even now, Tom could hear the villain's mocking laugh ringing in his ears. Yes, Silas Snoops had locked him in the caravan, had knocked the block away from the wheel, and had sent the caravan hurtling down the hillside towards the flooded river.

Can our hero be blamed for turning pale? Can he be blamed for uttering a hoarse cry of stupefied horror?

It was all over in less time than it takes to tell. Down the hillside lumbered the caravan, gathering speed with every yard.

Rumble-rumble!

With unerring aim, it went straight for the river, and our hero had no time to climb out through the window.

Splash—plunge!

Into the river went the caravan, and Tom found himself fighting for his very life. The water raced and bubbled round the vehicle, and with a giddy lurch, which sent Tom staggering from end to end of the little room, the caravan plunged over on its side, whereat the water came surging through in a great flood.

It all happened in the twinkling of an eye. And while people were running down towards the river, Silas Snoops stood near the big tent. His eyes were gleaming with triumph, and a low chuckle escaped his cruel lips.

"The boy is doomed!" he hissed. "A good thing, too! This time I've settled him—and for good!"

And with these mocking words, Silas Snoops gave vent to another triumphant laugh.

But wait!

Our hero is not made of weak stuff. He is full of grit, and never for a moment does he intend to perish miserably, as Silas Snoops hopes. Even now, Tom is battling manfully for his very life.

Look! What is that over there? What is that

dark object, rising above the level of the nearly-submerged caravan? What is it which comes into view as the caravan plunges down to its final resting place?

It is Tom's head!

A moment later his shoulders follow—for Tom has succeeded in getting out of the death-trap, and now he is struggling for his life in the flood waters of the swollen river.

Little did any of those onlookers know of Tom's great struggle. Little did they realise how he had battled with death during those tense seconds!

Through pluck alone, Tom had got out of the sinking caravan. And at last, as it took its final plunge, Tom struck out and rose to the surface. He had escaped from that prison, and now he was fighting for his life in the flooded water.

Only the first of his perils had been overcome! There were others—more deadly, and more terrible.

The river was full of strong, treacherous currents. They seemed to tug our hero down, as he struck out manfully for the shore. For Tom is a splendid swimmer, and any ordinary water would not offer him any difficulties.

But just now the river was in a dangerous state, owing to heavy rains, and at this point—as Silas Snoops had known only too well—the current was deadly. There was a great pool here, with undercurrents which tugged and pulled at any hapless swimmer. And although Tom tried to get to the shore, the task was beyond his powers. The current was pulling him down—it was inevitably forcing him to his death!

Our Hero's Great Triumph!

WITH a gasping, gurgling cry, Tom came up—for the second time.

And he knew that the end was very near.

For if he plunged down again, and then came up for the third time, all hope would be lost. After that he would plunge down—down to the bottom of the river, there to remain! With all his strength he fought against the current, and so great was his determination, so valiant his efforts, that he succeeded in making a little headway.

On the far banks, and stretched out across the meadows, he could see scores of excited spectators—including Smiler the Clown, and old Sam Boggs. But they could do nothing for the hapless lad. They knew how strong the current was, and they dared not plunge in, for that would have meant sacrificing their own lives. And there wasn't a boat anywhere near.

As for our Tom, his struggles were now weakening—the treacherous currents were proving too strong for him. Hope had almost died in his breast, when a choking cry of joy broke from his lips. For he had seen something over there, on the grass—the form of a horse!

In other words, Bert the Bronco!

And, in the twinkling of an eye, Tom realised that if he was to be saved, Bert the Bronco was the only one who could help him.

"Yes!" breathed Tom. "It's the only way!"

With a great effort, he gave vent to a peculiar kind of whistle—a shrill, long-drawn-out sound—and as it went echoing across the meadow, Bert the Bronco paused in his grazing, and pricked up his ears. He gazed towards the river.

Again came that whistle.

This time Bert broke into action. With a swift leap into the air, he set off towards the river—galloping with the speed of lightning.

"He's heard—he's heard!" muttered Tom.

And with these words he devoted all his remaining energies to the task of keeping afloat. The next moment, Bert the Bronco went plunging

into the river, and the brave horse swam out into mid-stream, battling successfully against the treacherous currents.

In a trice Tom was on the faithful bronco's back, and they were both swimming strongly towards the shore. It was one of the most marvellous rescues that had ever been accomplished. Tom's life had been saved by a horse!

As Silas Snoops saw what had happened, he ground his teeth with rage.

"Foiled again!" he hissed, between his thin lips. "I have been beaten now—but my time will come!"

And with these deadly words Silas Snoops made himself scarce.

In the meantime, Tom had fallen listlessly to the ground, after Bert the Bronco had safely landed him on the bank. Smiler the Clown and the big boss and many of the other circus people had come crowding round, and they were anxious concerning our hero.

"Up into my caravan!" roared Signor Boggannini. "Carry him to my caravan! He shall have the best of everything!"

"Bravo, kid!" said Smiler, as he lifted Tom gently into his arms.

"I'm all right!" muttered Tom, opening his eyes, and gazing into Smiler's face. "I—I can walk—"

"No, kid—you're dead beat!" said the clown.

"Good old Bert!" said Tom, with a lump in his throat. "Bert saved my life, and I shall always remember it!"

And, from that minute onwards, Bert the Bronco and our hero were firmer friends than ever. There was an uncanny understanding between them.

So the affair passed off—with not a soul guessing that a dastardly attempt at murder had been perpetrated by Silas Snoops. Only Tom guessed the truth, and, as he had no proof, he held his tongue. He knew that it had been no accident. For he had heard Silas Snoops' mocking laughter, and he vowed that he would be on his guard in future.

By the evening, Tom had fully recovered, for our hero was a boy of remarkable pluck and strength, and when he appeared in the ring to do his "turn" during that night's performance, he was a tremendous success. The crowds cheered him again and again, and every one of those cheers was like a pain in the gizzard to Silas Snoops.

Tom was the hero of the evening, indeed! The whole town had heard of Bert the Bronco's great feat, and the brave horse himself came in for many rounds of applause. Tom's success was instantaneous. Of all the circus performers, he was the most favoured. The crowds would not let him go.

When Silas Snoops came on, later, to do his wildly-advertised turn, he was hardly given a clap. The public didn't like him much now—for Tom had eclipsed him.

The realisation made Silas Snoops more bitter than ever. His black heart was full of schemes for getting rid of his young rival. But Tom was on his guard now, and he was prepared for anything that the villain might attempt!

Our Hero's Great Idea!

AFTER the show that night, there was all bustle and excitement and movement. The great tent was about to be pulled down—for in the night the circus would move on to the next town.

Tom was excited with it all. He wanted to help to do his share. But Smiler caught him by the shoulder, and grinned cheerfully.

"Nothing doing, kid!" he said. "You're the star performer of this circus—and the stars don't do any work of this kind!"

"But what does it matter?" asked our hero. "I am willing to help if I'm wanted!"

"But you're not wanted," replied Smiler. "Come along into the caravan, and have some supper."

Just as they were about to leave the big tent, Tom pointed to something which stood on one side, covered over with great lengths of canvas.

"What's that, Smiler?" he asked, pointing. "I've wondered several times what it could be."

But just then the big boss himself came up. He had heard Tom's words, and he frowned.

"That?" he said. "That's the Great Gun!"

"The gun?" repeated Tom, in wonder.

"The Gigantic Cannon," replied Signor Boggannini, with a sigh. "Until a few weeks ago it was my greatest turn!"

With a movement of his hand, Signor Boggannini swept the canvas off the gun, and Tom looked at it in wonder. It was an immense thing—just like one of those old-fashioned cannons, only much bigger—and was made of wood, although it seemed very much like solid iron, until you looked at it closely.

"But what is it?" asked our hero, in greater wonder than ever.

"It's not a gun, really," replied Sam Boggs. "It's only an imitation. At the back of it there's a kind of cradle, with a big length of elastic. It's really worked by a winch, and when the elastic gets tight enough, it is suddenly released—causing anything contained in the muzzle to be shot out like a bullet. I used to call the turn 'The Living Bullet.' But it's no good now—Charley's dead."

"Charley?" repeated Tom.

"Yes," said the big boss. "Charley was a chimpanzee—a monkey. We used to shoot him out of this gun on to a trapeze on the other side of the tent. It was a tremendous attraction, and I'm afraid I shall never be able to get another monkey to do it. Charley died of old age, and I've never been able to train another chimpanzee to do the same thing."

A glow came into Tom's eyes, and he gazed eagerly at the circus proprietor.

"Let me do it, sir!" he cried fearlessly.

"You!" said the big boss, with a violent start.

"Yes, me!" cried Tom. "Let me get into the gun, and be flung through the air on to a trapeze. I'm game, sir! Wouldn't it be better than a monkey? And you could call the turn 'The Human Bullet.' Think of the tremendous crowds that would come flocking in!"

Sam Boggs slapped his thigh, and then he stared at Smiler.

"The boy's got brains!" he shouted. "It's a great idea!"

"But the danger, boss?" said Smiler anxiously. "You wouldn't let the kid do it?"

"Oh, please!" cried Tom. "It's not dangerous, is it? Let me have a trial, anyhow! The net is in position, and if I miss the trapeze, I shall fall into the net. So where's the danger?"

"By Heavens! Why not?" shouted the big boss. "The boy's right, Smiler! He can't hurt himself! If he misses the trapeze, he'll fall into the net! We'll give him a trial!"

"Oh, thank you, sir!" panted Tom excitedly.

Men were called, and the great cannon was got ready for use. This was to be a private trial—long after the public had gone. And Signor Boggannini was fairly dancing about with excitement. If Tom was successful, it would mean greater fame for him than ever.

(I know jolly well that a trick like this can be performed, because it was done in Professor Onions' Gigantic Circus. In fact, Johnny Onions, of the Remove, did it before he came to St. Frank's.

I'm only saying this, in case somebody accuses me of pinching the wheeze. Well, we can't always get new ideas, can we? Besides, I'm going to work it differently, anyhow!—AUTHOR).

And then came the great moment.

The elastic was stretched out by the winch, and Tom was crouching right inside that gun barrel. Never for an instant did he feel the faintest indication of fear. He knew that the net was in position, and he knew, too, that he was as agile as any monkey. If a chimpanzee could do this trick, so could he!

The order came from the big boss at last.

"Ready!" he shouted. "All right, boy—let her go!"

From the mouth of the gun came a great burst of smoke—just an imitation discharge, for the sake of effect. The next moment our Tom went hurtling out into mid air—a veritable human bullet!

Our Hero's Awful Peril!

THROUGH the air went Tom—and then, amid a cry of wonder and amazement from the onlookers, he landed as lightly as a feather on the trapeze on the far side of the great tent.

In a trice, Tom swung himself round and round, and then sat lightly upon the cross-bar.

"My Heavens!" cried Signor Boggannini. "He's done it!"

"Of course he's done it, Boss!" grinned Smiler. "Tom can do anything!"

A minute later, Tom was in the ring, and Signor Boggannini was clapping him on the back. The big boss was flushed with excitement, and he was filled with enthusiasm.

"Well done, lad—well done!" he shouted. "My Heavens, I'll give you twice your present salary! In the next town, you'll do that trick in public, and the fame of my circus will be greater than ever before! 'The Human Bullet'! It's the idea of the century!"

And Tom flushed with modesty, and protested that he had done nothing.

As for Silas Snoops, he gritted his teeth with fresh rage. Here was his young rival gaining more laurels still! It was a bitter pill for Silas Snoops to swallow. And then and there he made a great vow. In the very next town he would deal drastically with Tom. Already a cunning, villainous idea had taken shape in Silas Snoops' evil mind. He went to his own caravan, his eyes burning, his face transfigured with rage.

And so Tom went to bed, happier than ever. He remembered nothing of that night, for he slept like a top. When he awoke next morning the circus was pitched on another meadow, many miles away.

A fresh town had been reached, and Tom's fame had gone before him. Everybody in the town was talking about the Wonder Boy—the greatest circus performer who had ever lived.

When the evening came, and all the great lights of the circus were blazing, the crowds turned up in their thousands. Never before had Signor Boggannini seen so many people coming to his show, and the big boss felt his heart glowing within him. He knew well enough that he had to thank Tom for all this! Tom was the lucky mascot of his circus, and never for an instant did Sam Boggs regret that impulse which had led him to take Tom in.

And that night, after Tom had delighted the crowd by his performance with Bert the Bronco, and with many other amazing tricks, the Star Turn of the evening came on.

The Human Bullet!

A murmur went through the packed audience when the preparations were seen. This was the

greatest sensation of all time. A human being was to be fired from the great cannon, and to be sent hurtling across the big tent on to a trapeze waiting on the far side. And now there was no net beneath, for Tom scorned the use of such a precaution.

"Feel all right, kid?" murmured Smiler, as Tom was about to get into the gun barrel.

"Yes!" said our hero calmly. "Don't worry about me, Smiler. I know I shall be safe."

Little did Tom know that Silas Snoops was lurking near the great cannon! Little did he know that Chunga the elephant trainer, was there, too. While other turns had been taking place in the ring, Silas Snoops and Chunga had been working secretly. And they had committed a dastardly deed.

"Is it all prepared?" muttered Silas Snoops, as Chunga came up to him.

"It is ready, sahib!" whispered the sinister Hindoo. "Within a few minutes the accursed boy will be dead!"

As the audience waited expectantly, Silas Snoops crouched in the shadows, watching—waiting. His eyes were burning, and his black soul was unrepentant. He waited to see our hero go to his doom!

For what had these villains done?

It can be told in a dozen or so words. They had added more elastic to that cannon! They had put treble the amount of elastic that there ought to have been, and the result of that villainy would be inevitable. For those at the winch would not notice the difference, and thus, when Tom was flung from the cannon's mouth, he would not merely shoot across the tent towards that waiting trapeze. No! He would hurtle with stupendous force right up into the air—right through the top of the tent—right out into the open—to crash down, hundreds of yards away, a mangled, pitiful piece of human wreckage!

And, unknown to all, this deadly work had been done!

Signor Boggannini stood by, his hand ready. The signal came from those in charge of the winches that all was prepared. Up went the big boss' hand, and the audience waited in a fever of impatience.

"Fire!" roared Signor Boggannini.

And, as he spoke, the catch was released!

(Does Tom die, as Silas Snoops has planned? Does he fall upon the ground, hundreds of yards away, a mangled heap of wreckage? You'll know when you read next week's thrilling instalment!—WILLY).

BETWEEN OURSELVES.

(Continued from page 37.)

Marjorie Nelson* (Acton), Marie Smith* (Acton), Stanley Goodworth (Goole), Ralph Sewell* (St. Ives), R. A. J. A. Gleeson (Limerick), H. G. Barnes (Vancouver), V. Maddocks* (Sydney), Marjorie F. Higgs* (Wolverhampton), Leslie Albery* (Plumstead), Philip J. Fleet* (Birmingham), H. Slater (Nelson), John Kerry (Nottingham), Alec B. Haden-Morris (Horley), "Appreciative IV." (Victoria, S.W. 1), A. Foley (Bow), Arthur Palmer** (Gibraltar), Mrs. Alice Harris* (Plaistow), Frank E. Elliff (East Sheen), Frederick Winter (Lichfield), George Rudge (Plymouth).

I am glad that your parents always look forward to the Old Paper, Marjorie Nelson. It gives me great pleasure to read such items in my readers' letters. Don't worry about old "Sarcastic." I really believe he was only joking. Yes, do write to me again. I'm always pleased to hear from my readers once; but I'm better pleased when I hear from them twice—and I simply hug myself with joy when they keep on writing. What about old Terence Sullivan? He's the sort! He writes to me every week, as regularly as clockwork, and his letters are so interesting that I should positively feel a sense of loss if they failed to arrive. So you'll take the tip, won't you? And pass it on to Marie, too.

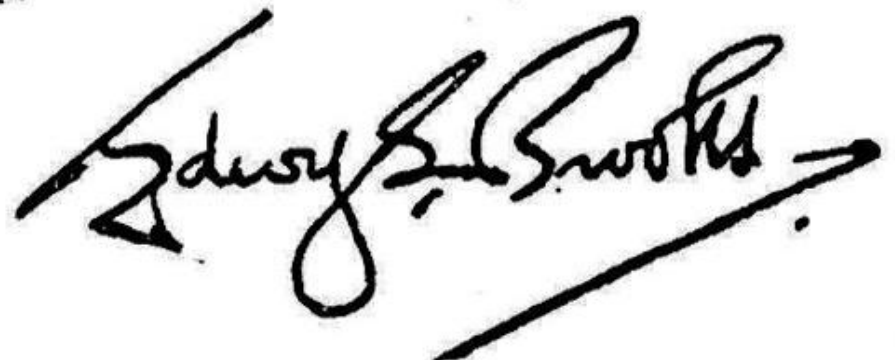
You're another of the regulars, too, Ralph Sewell. I am glad you agree with me about Handforth and his minor: "I think you're right when you say that the Handforth brothers are the most human and natural of all your characters, and I don't think W. H. Pizzev will find many readers agreeing with

him. I vote Willy to be the pick of the whole crowd." Yes, and when the result of the Voting is known—as it will be known within a few weeks now—I have an idea that Willy will get more points than any of the other characters. And old Handy won't be very far behind him, either.

Please write to the Editor, R. A. J. A. Gleeson. Both the questions you want answering are purely editorial.

A Canadian series appeared in the Old Paper, H. G. Barnes, in 1921, commencing in the issue dated July 23rd—No. 320, Old Series—with the story entitled, "The Montana Mystery," and followed by "The Terror of Roaring Z," "The Rustlers' Secret," "Up the Ghost River," "Redskin Cunning," "The Valley of Gold," "The Traitors of Caribou Pass," and "The Fury of Thunder Rapids." Perhaps we can have another Canadian series later on. But there'll be an awful row in Australia and New Zealand and South Africa if I take the St. Frank's chaps to Canada again before making them visit our other Dominions.

Please thank your mother, V. Maddocks, for these words of hers, included in your letter: "I am very grateful that my son has stopped reading those cowboy and Indian books, and has started to read school tales. My husband and I read them as well, and we enjoy them, too." Perhaps some other parents will see these lines, and will take the tip.



HOW TO JOIN THE LEAGUE

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 82.

SECTION A	READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.
	I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare that I have introduced "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with the Membership Number assigned to me, and Membership Badge.
SECTION B	MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.
	I, Member No..... (give Membership No.), hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me..... (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.
SECTION C	NEW READER'S DECLARATION.
	I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer)to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY."
(FULL NAME).....	
(ADDRESS).....	

INSTRUCTIONS.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. *The second form* is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together, and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms, bearing the same number, are needed. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of

the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided that each pair of forms bears the same date and number.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medals can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

These Application Forms can be posted for ½d., providing the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

A FEW OF THE ADVANTAGES OF JOINING THE LEAGUE.

You can write to fellow members living at home or in the most distant outposts of the Empire.

You are offered free advice on choosing a trade or calling, and on emigration to the colonies and dependencies.

If you want to form a sports or social club, you can do so amongst local members of the League.

You are offered free hints on holidays, whether walking, biking or camping.

You can qualify for the various awards by promoting the growth of the League.

If you want help or information on any subject, you will find the Chief Officer ever ready to assist you.



ALL LETTERS in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C.4. Enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

Sold Out at Dover!

J. J. Hoser Cook, 21, Rook Street, Poplar, has been spending his holidays at Dover, and he had a big difficulty to get the "N. L. L." "I travelled all over the town," he writes, "but the reply was always the same, namely, that the newsagents had had lots of copies, but they were all sold out." That just shows how popular the NELSON LEE LIBRARY is. I must thank this correspondent for his all-round interesting letter, and the many sensible things he had to say.

Training a Dog.

"Jimmy" (Cape) wants to know how to train his dog to take food from nobody besides himself. This can be managed if the dog is taught to look only to its master for supplies—and friendship as well. This kind of thing is all right up to a point, but it is a bit selfish, for it means cutting off all other friendships, so far as the animal is concerned.

Very Handy!

An excellent letter reaches me from Suffolk. It is written by a "N. L. L." reader who has had a long stretch of illness in hospital, and he says: "I would like to say that I found the old paper a splendid companion with which to while away the long and tedious hours, and so did my ward chums to whom I distributed copies. I am thankful to be well again now." All best wishes go to this loyal supporter. I hope he will write again.

Employment on the Railway.

D. J. G. (Wimbledon) wants to get a job on either the Southern Railway or the Underground. His only way is to apply to the companies in question. He is in touch with both systems in the place where he lives.

"The Secret of Hill Cottage."

Has any reader got a copy of this play? It appeared in the NELSON LEE LIBRARY, issue dated December 24th, 1921. If so, the owner of the old number might drop a line to G. H. Harrison, 8, Woodbourne Villas, Douglas, Isle of Man.

A Wood Green Club.

E. R. M. writes from 97, Gladstone Avenue, Noel Park, Wood Green, N.22, to ask about the club he is forming. Would it be wise to hire a room in a private house? He thinks there might be a risk here, as the members will want music and the other residents might not be so keen. That's quite right. It might be wiser to start as a trial at the home of a member. A few friends meeting make the club, after all.

The Merchant Service.

A Romford reader wants to join the Merchant Service. I should advise him to write to Messrs. Devitt & Moore, 12, Fenchurch Buildings, London, E.C.3.

Puzzled About Clothes.

A Manchester chum tells me he has read that in the old days the clothes worn were far more suitable and healthy than modern rig. I doubt

this very much. Of course, this reader is not going back to the Picts and Scots; they travelled very light. But in the Middle Ages, though the prevailing fashions were picturesque, they were not particularly hygienic. It was the style among the great folks to hang beads and jewels and ornamental stuff on them till they were carrying tremendous weight. Light and easy togs which do not impede movement are undoubtedly best.

Lazy Letter Writers.

As a rule, the individual who puts off answering a letter is a professional procrastinator. It is in his blood to postpone a job. It won't be only a letter that ought to be written; he will miss the train, tide, time, everything that wants catching. You have to leave him to play his own silly little languid game. I recommend a Glasgow chum, who has been badly let down, to wash out the do-it-to-morrow fellows. They are a waste of time.

Critics of the "N. L. L."

A London friend says he feels fairly mad about certain criticisms he has heard of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY. Some fellows he knows were storming about something Handy did in a recent yarn. He need not worry. Anger indicates intense interest. Moreover, the doughty Handy can look after himself, right as rain.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

T. de Vries, c/o Mrs. Dart, 14, George Street, Dandenong, Victoria, Australia, would like to hear from readers in his district.

George R. Gardener, 100, Marks Road, Romford, Essex, wishes to hear from G. Spencer, of Ilford, also from readers in Australia, South America, and Africa.

Arthur Coles, 72, Wellington Street, Peterborough, wants to hear from anyone who knows the whereabouts of Harold Coles, last heard of in the employ of Mr. A. Thorne, York, Western Australia.

Thomas W. Gibbs, 1, Railway Terrace, Wool, Dorset, wishes to correspond with stamp collectors in the British Empire and the United States.

Charles Daniel, The Guildhall, Worcester, has for sale "N. L. L." (new series) No. 10 to present date; also "Tell" air pistol, cost 15/6.

Douglas Grout, 32, Burstow Road, Wimbledon, London, S.W.20, wishes to hear from readers in his district.

S. Orr, 22, Morden Hill, Lewisham, London, S.E.13 wishes to hear from members in his district.

Donald Augustine Riley, 126, Albert Street, Leddon, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to get in touch with members in his district, also to correspond with readers in England who are keen on cricket.

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